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Gender on the Line:
Technology, Restructuring and the Reorganization of Work in the Call Centre Industry

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ABSTRACT

This project, a case study of the emerging call centre industry in Canada, examines the impacts of restructuring on those in the lower tiers of the labour market. The first stage of the study surveyed managers at call centres in three sites in Canada: New Brunswick (St. John, Moncton and Fredericton), Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Toronto, Ontario. Issues surveyed included types of call centre applications, labour force composition (age, gender, race and disability), wage rates, hiring, training and promotion. The survey results clearly established that women and youth make up the majority of the call centre work force across Canada. The balance of the study, drawing on 53 in-depth interviews with current and former call centre employees, qualitatively examines this rapidly expanding form of service sector employment. Through the observations of the workers themselves, it also explores the stresses of this type of work, the nature of the training and skills involved, and the career prospects for call centre workers. In particular, the study examines the processes through which this work is "feminized"—that is, how it has emerged in most sites as unskilled, part-time and low-paid employment. In light of the limited career trajectories, the high burnout rates and the insecure working conditions at many call centres, the study recommends that provinces should become much more selective in their support of call centres as an employment creation strategy.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CATI	computer-assisted telephone interviewing
ECC	Economic Council of Canada
MCCT	Manitoba Call Centre Team
VDT	video display terminal

PREFACE

Good public policy depends on good policy research. In recognition of this, Status of Women Canada instituted the Policy Research Fund in 1996. It supports independent policy research on issues linked to the public policy agenda and in need of gender-based analysis. Our objective is to enhance public debate on gender equality issues and to enable individuals, organizations, policy makers and policy analysts to participate more effectively in the development of policy.

The focus of the research may be on long-term, emerging policy issues or short-term, urgent policy issues that require an analysis of their gender implications. Funding is awarded through an open, competitive call for proposals. A non-governmental, external committee plays a key role in identifying policy research priorities, selecting research proposals for funding and evaluating the final report.

This paper emanated from a call for proposals in April 1997 to study the gender dimensions of the relationship between the changing role of the state and the changing nature of women's paid and unpaid work and their vulnerability to poverty. Researchers were asked to identify policy gaps and new policy questions or trends, to propose frameworks for the evaluation, analysis and critique of existing policies, and to develop pragmatic alternatives to existing policies or new policy options.

Seven research projects were funded by Status of Women Canada on this issue. They examine Canadian legislation surrounding women who work at home for pay, work and Aboriginal women, the social vs. the economic gain associated with the social economy, women in the garment industry, disability-related policies, restructuring and regulatory competition in the call centre industry and the relationship between unpaid work and macro-economic policies. A complete list of the research projects is included at the end of this report.

We thank all the researchers for their contribution to the public policy debate.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Report examines the impact of economic restructuring on the construction of labour markets and particularly, the feminization of labour in Canada, with a view to providing input to policy makers, workers, firms and researchers concerned about issues of gender and work. The study was premised on the assumption that in order to respond appropriately to the diverse needs of women within particular locations in Canada, it is necessary to undertake policy research that recognizes the dynamic, local and contested nature of the current economic transition. To this end, a case study of the call centre industry, utilizing both surveys of management and qualitative interviews with workers, was conducted in three locations in Canada. The first chapter of the Report explains the process of restructuring in Canada and the associated feminization of labour. It then goes on to detail the emergence of the call centre industry, in which firms provide or market products over the telephone, and to justify the Report's "case study" methodology. The call centre industry is representative of several key characteristics of the current transition: the shift towards expanding employment in the service sector; the reorganization of firms driven by applications of information and communication technologies; and the competition among localities for investment and jobs. In the past decade, many Canadian firms have restructured their operations to take advantage of the efficiencies produced by providing services over the telephone, resulting in a growth of approximately 20 percent per year in the industry. Economic development agencies within provincial governments have responded to this rapid growth by targeting this industry as a vehicle for job creation. Provinces compete with each other over the site decisions of firms engaged in creating or consolidating call centre operations through tax incentives, forgivable "loans" for training and assistance with employee recruitment.

Despite the attention focused on the call centre industry in the context of these local economic development efforts, there has been little information publicly available on the composition of these work forces. The second chapter of the Report presents the findings of a survey conducted among call centre managers in each of the three study sites, New Brunswick (St. John, Fredericton and Moncton), Winnipeg and Toronto on these issues. The survey data on the gender breakdown of call centre labour forces was remarkably consistent across study sites, in which an average of 70 to 72 percent of all workers in all sites were women. The survey also found that a high proportion of call centre employees are youth (29 and under), who comprise about half of permanent staff and between 60 to 70 percent of the temporary staff at call centres in our study sites. Our survey data also provided useful information on the prevalence of non-standard forms of employment in call centres, such as permanent part-time, temporary full-time and temporary part-time work, revealing that between 31 to 45 percent of all call centre employees worked in non-standard jobs. Finally, the survey provided data on salary ranges for call centre work, which showed clearly lower salaries for part-time workers. There is some evidence to suggest that the women in call centre work tend to be overrepresented in the lower paying non-standard positions, while higher paying full-time jobs are disproportionately held by men.

The third chapter builds on this analysis to suggest that the emerging call centre industry reflects a larger trend towards the increasing polarization of labour markets remarked upon in a 1990 Economic Council of Canada Report, *Good Jobs/Bad Jobs*. Our study suggests that call centres are indicative of the trend in the new service economy for there to be a widening gap between a smaller number of "good" (full-time, well-compensated and secure) jobs and a growing number of "bad" (temporary, part-time, insecure and low-paying) jobs. Good jobs in call centres are usually found in the inbound centres, where customers are calling the centre for a service. Inbound centres are often found in in-house customer service departments of larger corporations, although this work can also be contracted out to independent call centre firms. Inbound call centre employees are more likely to be employed on a permanent and full-time basis, and tend to earn more in both wages and benefits than outbound call centre employees. Outbound call centres employ individuals to make calls for the purposes of sales, survey research or fund-raising. These centres pay less and tend to employ a higher proportion of workers in non-standard contracts. These firms also appear to have higher rates of employee turnover. Many outbound call centre jobs clearly fit the Economic Council's definition of "bad jobs," while some, but not all, inbound call centre jobs might fit the definition of "good jobs." It is suggested that government job creation strategies are insufficiently attentive to these important differences among firms.

Much of the Report draws on in-depth interviews with 53 current and former call centre employees to provide a detailed qualitative assessment of the nature of call centre employment, and how it fits into the lives of the people who perform it. The fourth chapter describes the everyday realities of teleservice and telemarketing work, which includes the identification of a number of features of this type of work that create high levels of stress for employees. This includes the emotional demands of dealing with irate callers, and the high level of monitoring at these workplaces. Monitoring is conducted both qualitatively, through a supervisor remotely and randomly listening in on an employee/customer interaction, and quantitatively, through the production of data on the number and length of calls serviced by an employee during the workday as well as the time spent unavailable to take calls. The high levels of stress in this type of work can have both physical and emotional consequences for employees, leading to high levels of turnover in the industry. Our research also revealed that there are a number of strategies that firms can use, and that governments should encourage their use to minimize the impacts of stress on call centre employees.

Call centre work is skilled labour. Our research revealed that these jobs both call for and engender skills in interpersonal communication and customer service. Common perceptions of this work as unskilled, we argue, are related to its construction as "feminized" work. Because skills required for "dealing with people" are culturally considered to be personal characteristics more common to women and women predominately perform these jobs, these attributes are more likely to be represented by call centre managers as the natural "talents" of their employees rather than as valuable and valued "skills." Despite the fact that their employers undervalue them, some call centre jobs do provide younger workers with workplace skills in professional communication norms and conflict resolution. On the other hand, it is clear that call centre jobs do not generally provide "high tech" skills to employees or improve computer literacy, beyond basic keyboarding.

The nature of the skills involved in call centre work, and their lack of valorization in the public realm are connected to the final set of issues that we discuss. A major factor in assessing the usefulness of policies promoting call centres as a job creation strategy must be the role of centre work in advancing or improving the career or life prospects of those who get these jobs. Typically, governments do not assess the wisdom of job-creation policies over this longer trajectory. Yet, the high stress nature of call centre work and its high turnover rate, particularly in outbound centres, compels an investigation of its consequences for employees. While further work needs to be done on these questions, our interviews suggested that call centre employment is a career option for only a very small proportion of workers, usually those who work full-time at in-house service departments of large firms. Many others find themselves trapped in telephone work, with their chances of finding other, more secure employment unimproved. Our evidence suggests that for some young workers, call centre employment may be an unhappy introduction to the labour market that instils negative workplace attitudes and creates little incentive for working harder to get ahead.

The final chapter identifies a number of recommendations for actions that a range of different groups might take to improve conditions for women working within the industry. Our proposals recognize that in addition to governments, firms, unions, activists, workers and consumers all play a role in shaping the contours of this industry, and possible suggestions for action are included for each of these groups. The recommendations are grouped into five general categories:

1. **Recognize the Feminization of Labour as an Equity Issue:** Pay equity legislation should be deployed, where appropriate. However, we also recognize the limitations of pay equity strategies in the context of pronounced labour market segmentation.

2. **Support "Good" Jobs and Discourage "Bad" Jobs:** We target the dual nature of labour market regulation in Canada, and suggest that differences between the working conditions and benefits associated with primary and secondary labour markets be reduced. We suggest that governments only provide job creation support to those employers who will provide adequate wages and working conditions to their employees.

3. **Minimize Stress-Related Problems and Worker Burnout:** Specific proposals to minimize worker stress include monitoring the impacts of information technologies in the workplace and the regulation of the telemarketing industry.

4. **Enhance the Skills of Workers:** Workers need more support for career skills development so that they will not be trapped in call centre work. We recommend that funds for skills development be targeted to workers rather than firms.

5. **Integrate the Perspectives of Workers:** We strongly urge that the needs and perspectives of workers be more fully integrated into the policy making process.

1. INTRODUCTION: A CASE STUDY APPROACH TO ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING AND THE FEMINIZATION OF LABOUR

Restructuring has become a key word in current debates over globalization, the changing role of the state, and increasing polarization of incomes and wealth within Canada (Brodie, 1995; 1996). As a consequence of globalization, the internationalization of investment and production processes, facilitated by both liberalized regional and global trading regimes and by advances in information technologies, is generally understood to be the driving force behind current shifts in national economies (Boyer and Drache, 1996). Under the rubric of restructuring, the nature, scope and functioning of governments at every level have been subjected to re-examination and re-definition. In Canada, we have undergone a shift in which the post-war Keynesian welfare state has been replaced by a stripped-down state form in which the primary role of government is conceived as the facilitation of the activities of the market (Drache, 1996; Jessop, 1993). Accompanying this shift has been a discursive shift in the meaning of citizenship, the allocation of individual vs. social responsibility and a realignment of many formerly "public" functions into the "private" sphere (Cohen, 1996; Brodie, 1996). Despite significant differences in state form among developed nations, policy responses to "globalization" have been remarkably similar. The nation-state is no longer conceived as an effective vehicle for mediating the uneven effects of global market shifts on workers and regions. Although the state remains the primary site for the articulation of claims by disadvantaged groups, its political efficacy in addressing those claims has increasingly been called into question (Brodie, 1996).

Attempting to address equity goals in the context of shifts caused by economic restructuring in an era of globalization presents particular challenges for policy makers. Governments must negotiate not only new legal or economic obstacles to redistributive social policy, such as those contained in trade agreements (Cohen, 1996) or enforced by international financial markets, they must also contend with a discursive terrain that has become less receptive to the claims of those identified as "special interest groups." While the primary aim of this study is not the analysis of the ways that this discursive terrain has shifted (see Brodie, 1995; 1996), these shifts are an important part of the phenomenon of restructuring, and must be taken into account. Many analyses of the impact of current transformations in the global economic order, both from the left and the right, posit "globalization" as a monolithic and unified force acting upon nation-states. In many of these accounts, global economic forces are made to appear inevitable and the only policy avenues that seem available to nation-states are to either reject globalization outright, or to act as "mid-wives" to the globalization of production and investment. However, some observers have rejected this dichotomy, and called for research which examines the specific dynamics of restructuring through localized case studies (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Buchanan, 1995a; 1995b).

This study is premised on the assumption that in order to respond appropriately to the diverse needs of women in particular locations within Canada, it is necessary to undertake policy research that recognizes the dynamic, local and contested nature of the current transition. It is our aim that the present study, which encompasses the complex intersections between firm

practices at the local and national level, local government strategies and the diverse needs and experiences of call centre workers in several different cities, will reveal a wider range of possible policy alternatives for governments. We do not assume that call centre employment, premised as it is on labour force segmentation, is always or inevitably a bad option for individuals or for local governments. Our study reveals a diversity within the call centre industry; between inbound and outbound centres; between in-house call centres and call centre firms; between different approaches to training, recruitment, and evaluation of employees and the organization of the work. In acknowledging this diversity, we complicate the analysis but also open up more avenues for possible intervention. It is also true, however, that there are several key processes driving recent transformations in firms, which we collectively have identified as globalization. In the balance of this introduction, we will outline some of those processes, identify how they have affected workers, and particularly women workers, in Canada, and provide a preliminary description of the call centre industry, which provides the context for this particular case study.

The Impact of Economic Restructuring on Firms

In recent years, as they have been subjected to increasingly intense international competition, companies have been forced to restructure their production, management and employment practices. "Flexibility" has been a keyword in many of these changes. Firms have utilized recent technological developments in the area of telecommunications and software to co-ordinate the dispersal of operations across space, which facilitate the division of labour and responsibilities within firms among sites and workers according to cost effectiveness. In some cases, new management practices have been adopted which flatten management hierarchies and reorganize workers into "teams" (Armstrong, 1996, p. 51). Although some have celebrated these innovations for their potential to empower technologically proficient employees through their re-integration with conceptual stages of production (Piore and Sabel, 1984), more recent developments have revealed the limited scope of these payoffs. They tend to accrue only to the high-wage, high-skill sector of the work force, which represents a shrinking "core" of the labour market in the new economic conditions (Economic Council of Canada [ECC], 1990). Unfortunately, current conditions also present opportunities (and arguably greater short-term incentives) for firms to restructure along the "low road" by seeking to minimize labour and other costs while increasing employee productivity. Cost reduction can be obtained through relocation to cheaper sites as well as increased reliance on non-standard employment contracts, such as short-term contracts, temporary help agencies, or casual and part-time workers who generally are not paid as high wages or benefits. Productivity increases are obtained by reclassifying job categories and enforcing higher performance quotas through electronic monitoring techniques (Shalla, 1997; Leidner, 1993).

Global economic restructuring has led to declining employment in the manufacturing sector while the burgeoning service sector has been the primary source of new jobs. Many of these jobs are not permanent full-time positions, however, and they tend to be lower paid and have fewer benefits than the manufacturing jobs they are replacing. One important indicator of the impact of recent shifts in the labour market on workers is the rise in part-time work. In 1995, 16.6 percent of Canadian workers worked part-time, in contrast to 3.8 percent in 1953. The

proportion of part-time work that is involuntary is also rising. Thirty-five percent of part-time workers in 1993 would rather have had a full-time position (Duffy, 1997). Other forms of non-standard work, such as casual or temporary work, are also on the increase.

A significant increase in polarization has accompanied this shift toward the service sector in Canada as in other developed nations such as the United States (Sassen, 1998, ch. 7). A widening gulf has emerged between a shrinking core of stable full-time employment and an expanding periphery of less desirable work: the "good jobs/bad jobs" dichotomy. According to the ECC, the characteristics of the increasing number of "bad jobs" found in the new service economy are non-standard conditions of employment: low wages, few benefits, lack of job security and limited career trajectories (ECC, 1990; Bakker, 1996). This growing disparity between the low-wage, casualized employment in the bottom tier of the service sector and the highly paid, highly skilled employees in business services is linked to larger shifts in the global economy which have led to the over-valorization of some sectors and the corresponding devalorization of others (Sassen, 1998).

Restructuring and Women: The Feminization of Labour

Women in Canada have borne a disproportionate share of the burden of this process of economic restructuring, both at home and in labour markets. In the domestic sphere, government's moves towards privatization and reduced budgets for social services and health care, for example, have led to an increase in the caretaking that takes place in the home; this work is done primarily by women. At the same time, and despite their increasing labour market participation over the past decades, women continue to occupy a secondary position in the labour market. Generally, working women have been concentrated in the part-time and low-wage end of the expanding service sector (Armstrong, 1996). Women are disproportionately represented in part-time jobs, making up 68.8 percent of Canada's part-time labour force in 1995 (Duffy, 1997). Yet their presence there can no longer be attributed to "choice" in an era of declining real wages and a shrinking social safety net. The significant rise in the number of women who are confined to involuntary part-time work, or other forms of non-standard employment, suggests that women are simply being passed over for men in the lottery to obtain the shrinking number of available "good jobs" in the restructured economy (Bakker, 1996)—which is not to suggest that, for men, the labour market situation has been improving; it has not. Rather, it means that to compare women's situation to men's will not provide a clear picture of the impact of restructuring on working women. As Pat Armstrong (1996) observes:

> The restructuring that is part of globalization has created more women's work in the market. . . . This kind of feminization of the labour force does not mean that the position of most women has improved. Instead it means that the position of some men has deteriorated, becoming more like that of women. While some women and men have good labour force jobs, many more women and men have bad jobs.

The transformation in employment patterns that has accompanied the restructuring of the last several decades is often referred to as the "feminization of labour" (Fudge, 1996). As the

above quotation indicates, the feminization of labour actually refers to a two-phase process. We have seen both the feminization of the labour market, or an increase in women's labour market participation rates. We have also seen a shift in the type of jobs being created, resulting in a higher proportion of non-standard employment, or women's work. So, more women are working, and more men are doing women's work. These processes are not disconnected, nor are they unrelated to the larger processes of restructuring that we have been discussing. Indeed, some theorists posit a systemic linkage between the devaluing of a growing range of jobs and the feminization of employment (Sassen, 1998). Whether or not one explains it in structural terms, however, a transformation in the nature and conditions of work is clearly underway in the Canadian economy. Unfortunately, rather than eroding the traditional sexual division of labour, these changes appear to be bringing about its consolidation, and even growth (Boyd, Mulvihill and Myles 1991, p. 422; Fudge, 1996).

A Case Study of Restructuring: The Call Centre "Industry"

This study focuses on a site in which the restructured state, firm and labour force converge—the call centre industry. Call centres are a relatively recent phenomenon made possible by the dissemination of telecommunications and information technologies. The technology enables telephone service representatives to deal quickly and remotely with customer needs by connecting the representative to the customer's account information on her/his computer as the call is relayed to the headset. As call centres can be centralized in locations far from the customers of a business, they allow firms to cut costs by reducing the number of local service outlets. Inbound call centres for customer service have become increasingly popular in industries such as banking, insurance, hotel and hospitality, courier and postal services, and airlines. Outbound call centres, where automated dialling systems route calls to agents for the purpose of sales and marketing, research or fund-raising, also form a significant part of this sector. Firms utilizing outbound call centre services include long distance telephone service providers, investment dealers, non-profit organizations, retail outlets, credit card companies and insurance brokers.

Although independent data on the industry in Canada is not available, the consensus among industry participants and market forecasters is that the call centre industry is currently one of the fastest growing in this country.[1] In 1997, a Call Ontario report estimated that the industry had been growing at a rate of 20 to 25 percent per year and would continue to grow at that rate. There is evidence to suggest that growth in the industry is considerably slower in the U.S., around six percent a year.[2] However, the United States was the first country in which toll-free numbers became widely used in business and teleservice is currently a $90-billion-a-year business there.[3] In Canada, there are approximately 6,500 call centres, employing approximately 330,000 people in 219,000 agent positions.[4] The bulk of Canadian call centres are located in Ontario, close to 50 percent, and the sector employs between 100,000 to 150,000 people in that province.[5] Twenty-eight percent of the call centres are located in the West (Manitoba, Alberta, British Columbia), 19 percent in Quebec and 5 percent in Atlantic Canada.[6] The fact that the future of the industry in Canada is strong was reinforced by a 1994 survey of the Canadian call centre industry by Coopers and Lybrand which revealed that 95 percent of the firms surveyed rated their call centre operations as successful or very successful. Additionally, 49 percent of those firms planned to expand their operations

over the next five years, with 70 percent planning increases in staff, systems upgrades and training programs. The number of call centre agents had increased since a previous study in 1990, as had the number of calls handled per day, both inbound and outbound. However, the average salary paid to agents had remained approximately at 1990 levels.[7]

Not surprisingly, call centres have become the subject of job creation initiatives in urban centres across the United States as well as in a number of Canadian provinces. The de-industrialization of older manufacturing centres and the increased centralization of international business services in "global cities" associated with globalization have combined to create pockets of unemployment in many smaller urban centres in North America. While national governments have been less willing and less able to address these difficulties with activist social policy, governments at the provincial and local level have stepped into the breach. Among the tools that they have deployed are the aggressive marketing of localities and the provision of relocation incentives to businesses, what some would call "beggar-thy-neighbour" strategies. The call centre industry was a prime target for this strategy because of its relative mobility. Call centres require cheap labour and little local infrastructure beyond leased office space (computers, even headsets, are often couriered in to remote locations from a firm's usual supplier). This fits all too well with what many de-industrialized urban centres have to offer.

Labour costs comprise the great majority of call centre operating expenses, and can range between 60 to 80 percent, depending on the type of centre.[8] Therefore, the quantity, quality and most importantly, cost of labour in any given location will play a significant role in the firm's location decisions. In what one industry commentator labels the "space race," the search for locations that offer available pools of affordable and qualified labour has intensified (Read, 1998). Favoured locations for call centres in the U.S. have traditionally included Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Phoenix, Arizona; and Salt Lake City, Utah. Yet recent reports have suggested that these labour markets are drying up (Read, 1997). More recently, as the differential in telecom costs, the American unemployment rate and the Canadian dollar have all dropped to unprecedented lows, Canadian cities and Canadian workers have become more attractive to American firms. Although the vast majority of call centres in Canada have been and continue to be located in Ontario, some companies have begun to centralize and/or relocate their operations to other provinces during the last decade, including New Brunswick and Manitoba, where labour is cheaper and more plentiful.

In 1990, the New Brunswick government of then newly elected Premier Frank McKenna was the first to explicitly develop and pursue a call centre focused development strategy. Premier McKenna had been elected on a job creation platform and, early in his mandate, several individuals within the Department of Economic Development and Tourism developed a proposal to begin seeking out firms willing to relocate their call centre operations to the province. The New Brunswick sales pitch included a government brochure, "Call Centre Solutions," in which New Brunswick's high unemployment (10.7 percent) and low labour market participation rates were highlighted.[9] Frank McKenna strongly endorsed the strategy, and became personally involved in efforts to recruit firms to New Brunswick. The government offered incentives to firms locating in the province in the amount of forgivable "loans" for training new staff, which has amounted to as much as $11,000 per worker for some "blue chip" firms in the early years, and more recently, has been $5,000-$6,000 per employee.[10]

While insignificant in terms of the North American market as a whole, New Brunswick's strategy appeared highly successful at the local level. The provincial government was able to claim in 1996 to have created more than 5,000 jobs in call centres in the province during the preceding five years. The industry in New Brunswick has continued to grow, with job creation figures in 1998 totaling approximately 7,000.

In most provinces, there are now public/private partnerships of local telecom companies and government designed to market the locality to call centre businesses. The Manitoba Call Centre Team (MCCT) is one such partnership. Since its establishment in 1993, it reports that over 7,000 jobs have been created (Economic Development Winnipeg, 1998, p. 7). The MCCT is a joint venture of Economic Development Winnipeg, Manitoba Telecom Services, and the provincial government departments of Industry, Trade and Tourism and Rural Development. The team offers prospective call centre expertise in telecommunications, technology, real estate, call centre staffing and human resources management, industry suppliers, national and provincial practices, and industry financing. Other provinces that have actively attempted to recruit call centre business include Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, Quebec and Alberta. In some cases, such as in New Brunswick and Manitoba, there has been an effort to link the call centre strategy, at least in public perception, to other policy initiatives in the telecommunications and high technology sectors. However, the majority of the centres that are the targets of these policies do not require the services of highly skilled and specialized software engineers, but simply eager high school graduates with a pleasant manner on the telephone. In some cases, bilingualism is also an asset.

Materials produced by economic development agencies illustrate the priorities of the industry. In Manitoba, the documents highlight the province's key strengths as human resources, education and training, and technologies. They also focus on low worker turnover rates of between 2 to 5 percent, due to "Manitoba's strong work ethic" and "employee enthusiasm" (MCCT, Fact Sheets). Student enrolment numbers are listed in such materials. The MCCT is developing training programs at local high schools and community colleges: "Simply put, when you hire an agent in Manitoba, you can devote your training dollars to specific company programs and products—we'll take care of the rest" (MCCT, Fact Sheets). In Ontario, economic development materials highlight similar key points: a multilingual work force with relatively high unemployment and a low turnover rate (4 to 10 percent in Canada). They also advertise that specialized call centre curricula are offered at two regional community colleges, Niagara College and Centennial College.

The creation of these specialized training courses in community colleges and technical institutes designed for call centre employees has emerged as a significant piece of several governments' strategies for attracting firms. In many ways, the courses seem superfluous. The primary training needs that firms identify are usually product information, and the vast majority of firms conduct in-house training.[11] Workers we asked were astonished that someone would consider paying tuition to be trained for call centre work. What these courses do provide, however, is a guaranteed supply of willing call centre employees. As labour supply is such an important factor in site selection, the courses do serve a purpose, if not for the employees. Another employee recruitment avenue that has become increasingly significant is the local temporary employment agency. Firms use employment agencies not just to fill short-term

needs, but to provide a significant proportion of their call centre work force on a regular basis. The firm pays salaries to the agency, which pays a reduced amount to the employees. Individuals may end up working at a company for several years in this way. Some agencies, such as StaffMax in Winnipeg, target themselves exclusively towards the call centre market. Other potential employee recruitment tactics that have been used in smaller centres, where concerns about limited availability of workers are strongest, include the development of a centralized data base of potential employees through a "call centre job fair."[12]

Although a great deal of attention has been focused on the call centre labour force in the context of local economic development efforts, there has been little information publicly available on the composition of these work forces, in terms of gender, race or age. It was also somewhat difficult to obtain information on the proportion of full-time and part-time positions created in call centres, and therefore, on the proportion of women in part-time work. It can be gleaned from some of the industry literature that a good proportion of call centres may be targeting the youth labour force (i.e., specific references to youth unemployment rates). However, gender breakdowns were nowhere in evidence in any of the several industry studies that these researchers were able to obtain. Nor did provincial economic development agencies offer any assistance with this issue.[13] Despite significant general trends towards polarization and feminization of labour markets, neither restructuring firms nor governments interested in creating jobs appear to be concerned about the composition of the call centre work force. Yet, the apparent fit between high unemployment regions and labour force needs of call centres that has driven the competition among localities for this type of business, is not as tidy as it seems. In many cases, the transition from male-dominated (and often unionized) manufacturing employment to female dominated, non-standard service employment is not an easy one. It is possible that the competition for teleservice and telemarketing business among local governments might serve to exacerbate rather than reduce the tendency towards polarization of jobs and wages currently underway in Canada.

As an information technology driven sector concerned with the provision of services both to businesses and consumers, the call centre industry is a significant site in which to examine the impact of current restructuring trends on workers and on work. The apparent linkage between the feminization of labour and the shift to service employment suggests that the composition of the call centre labour force, including gender, will be a crucial factor to examine. However, we understand that feminization is not just a process of more women performing certain kinds of jobs, but also the creation of more "feminized" jobs. Therefore, in order to understand the process by which work is "feminized," we also need to study qualitatively the jobs themselves: how the employment relation is structured, the nature of the work, and the ways that employees are trained, monitored and evaluated.

Research Methodology and Its Relevance to Current Policy Dilemmas

> It is only by understanding the extent to which a new set of gendered employment relations is at the heart of the restructured economies that we can begin to comprehend the restructuring, as well as any space available within it for generating equality (Jensen, 1996, p. 92).

The primary objective of this study was the production of a contextualized narrative of the gendered experiences of teleworkers, with the aim of developing policy prescriptions to improve both the working conditions and future opportunities of workers in this sector. The project, which was conducted in Toronto, Winnipeg and New Brunswick, included two separate initiatives for gathering information regarding the circumstances of teleworkers: surveys of management and interviews with workers. Through cross-referencing the results of the mail survey of call centre managers with the qualitative employee interviews, we sought to provide a more nuanced and complete picture of call centre employment than either method would produce alone. The 53 employee interviews provide the detailed stories of individuals making their way in the industry, the daily stresses and achievements, frustrations and aspirations. Yet it was also important to contextualize the interviews within the larger industry. How representative were our subjects? Existing data on the industry, as we have noted, was unsuitable for this purpose. No information was available on the gender breakdown of the call centre labour force, nor on other identity categories such as youth, minorities or people with a physical disability. While our primary goal was to produce a qualitative study, it was necessary to obtain some basic quantitative information on the call centre industry in each of the sites. Therefore, the necessary first step in the study was to survey managers of call centres in the three study sites to obtain an overview of the industry in each of the sites. We obtained information regarding the composition (gender/race/age/ disability) of the labour force as well as basic information on wages, training and promotion within the call centres. Then we were able to proceed with the second component: semi-structured, in-person interviews regarding the experiences of individuals performing call centre work. Topics covered included how they came to the job, what the workplace was like, everyday stresses of the work, what the jobs had given them, their own analysis of the industry and their aspirations for the future.[14]

Our hope is that this study can reveal some of the ways in which firms have restructured to gain the benefits of employing "feminized" labour, that is, women and young people who are already marginalized in labour markets, in the context of the expanding call centre industry. We seek to understand how this process of reorganization itself, encouraged and even underwritten in some cases by local government, has contributed to the process by which some work is devalued (i.e., feminized) in the restructured service industry. Our underlying impetus is a concern for fairness and substantive equality in workplace opportunities. We would argue that the growing polarization of incomes and opportunities that mark recent shifts in Canadian labour markets are not driven, as a market-oriented analysis would suggest, entirely by relevant and justifiable differences in education, skills, or productivity of labour. Rather, shifts in the global economy which have led to the over-valorization of some sectors at the expense of others, combined with existing segmentations within labour markets along lines of race, gender, age, ethnicity and disability, have led to new and more pronounced inequalities. This study is designed to illuminate these processes in two ways. First, to supplement existing research on labour force segmentation. Second, to facilitate policy responses which attempt to address the problems presented by these growing gaps, rather than unwittingly reinforcing them through a failure to recognize the impacts of policy on differently situated workers.

2. THE DYNAMICS BEHIND THE MARKET FOR LABOUR IN CALL CENTRES

> Claudine:[15] *There are a lot of dynamics at play here. Anyway, I think it's because people who have been marginalized and who are out of the work force find this an easy entry point to better things, other employment . . . I used this job as a stepping stone so that I didn't find myself running out of unemployment and then onto welfare and that sort of trap that women often find themselves in. So, this was an opportunity to bridge that gap until something else came along.*

Labour Force Composition and Employment Practices in Call Centres: Toronto, Winnipeg and New Brunswick

In our introduction, we suggested that call centres provide an exemplary case study to examine the dynamics of gendered work in the restructuring Canadian economy of the late 1990s. Among our reasons is the fact that call centres reflect several of the most important shifts which have been identified in the scholarly literature on labour force restructuring: the shift to services, the role of technology, and the intensifying processes of polarization and the feminization of labour markets. These last are facilitated by the prevalence of non-standard employment contracts in service work. Since women and young people are generally over-represented in service employment in Canada (ECC, 1990), we would expect to find them over-represented in call centres as well. We might also expect to find a significant proportion of them working for low wages and in non-traditional employment contracts. However, we were not able to find available public data on the gender, age or ethnicity of "call centre" employees as such, as it is not a category that Statistics Canada has used, nor did the privately commissioned industry studies that we obtained consider these issues. However, the results of the mail-out survey that we conducted between May and July 1998, which was sent to call centre managers in New Brunswick, Winnipeg and Toronto, reveal that the gender and age composition of the call centre labour force does reflect reported trends.

In particular, the survey data on gender breakdown was remarkably consistent.[16] Across all categories of employment and all locations, the proportions of female workers in call centres ranged from a low of 58 percent (in permanent employment in Toronto) to a high of 81 percent (temporary employment in New Brunswick) (Table 1). The average percentage of women working at all sites and in all job categories ranged consistently between 70 and 72 percent. The proportion of women performing call centre work in New Brunswick was slightly higher than the average, between 75 and 81 percent. These percentages also roughly correspond with Census figures on the gender breakdown within the occupational category, sales and service, although that category is so large as to reflect only very general tendencies.[17]

Table 1. Percentage of Work Force Employed Female, New Brunswick, Winnipeg, Toronto and All, 1998

	Permanent	Temporary	Full-Time	Part-Time
New Brunswick	78	81	79	75
Winnipeg	70	71	70	73
Toronto	58	60	65	66
All	70	72	72	72

Similarly, the survey revealed that the proportions of call centre workers who are 29 and under are significant (Table 2). In New Brunswick, youth made up 63 percent of the temporary work force, and 49 percent of the permanent staff. In Toronto, the proportion of young temporary workers was 70 percent, while 51 percent of permanent employees were also youth. While the proportions of full-time employees who were 29 and under were substantially lower, from 37 percent in Winnipeg, they still comprise a substantial proportion of the overall work force. While slightly less than half of permanent and full-time workers at all sites were 29 and under, youth made up 63 percent of the temporary work force when results from all sites were combined.

Table 2. Percentage of Work Force Employed 29 and Under, New Brunswick, Winnipeg, Toronto and All, 1998

	Permanent	Temporary	Full-Time	Part-Time
New Brunswick	49	63	50	60
Winnipeg	43	60	37	48
Toronto	51	70	48	57
All	47	63	45	54

On the topics of race and immigration, our survey data is incomplete. Our interview sample of 21 participants appeared to reflect the greater racial and ethnic diversity of the City of Toronto. Of interview participants there, approximately half were non-white, while call centre employees interviewed in Moncton and St. John, New Brunswick and in Winnipeg were almost all white. Although our survey also attempted to inquire about the racial composition of call centre workplaces, as well as the employment of those with disabilities, the sample size and low rate of response to those questions on our surveys combined to produce too few results to report. However, the interviews did provide us with important information on race and immigration, which is reflected in our discussion of multicultural and multilingual communication skills in chapter five.

As suggested in the Introduction, one might expect to see linkages between work force composition and non-standard forms of employment. We might also expect to find that "feminized" work would also be correlated with relatively low wage rates. While our survey only provides limited data on these subjects, several findings are significant. Firstly, while firms in all sites reported that the majority of their employees were permanent and working full-time, a substantial minority were employed in non-standard work contracts (permanent part-time, temporary part-time, or temporary full-time). In New Brunswick, 35 percent worked at part-time or temporary positions. In Winnipeg, 45 percent had non-standard employment contracts. Even in Toronto, where the sample was much smaller, the percentage

of call centre workers in non-standard employment contracts was 31 percent[18] (Table 3). Again, these figures reflect a broader trend in the Canadian economy towards increasingly prevalent use of non-standard employment contracts. In 1994, 33 percent of the total Canadian work force was employed in non-standard work, up from 28 percent in 1989.[19]

Table 3. Percentage of Work Force According to Employment Status, New Brunswick, Winnipeg, Toronto and All Workers, 1998

	Standard Employment	**Non-Standard Employment**			
	Permanent Full-Time	Permanent Part-Time	Temporary Full-Time	Temporary Part-Time	Total Non-Standard*
New Brunswick	65	22	10	2	**35**
Winnipeg	55	21	7	17	**45**
Toronto	69	15	13	3	**31**
All	62	20	10	8	**38**

*May not add up to 100 because of rounding-off the numbers.

Finally, our study asked managers to report on wage ranges, from starting salaries to the highest hourly rates a worker can earn. In terms of the actual average earnings of call centre staff, the ranges may be somewhat misleading because we do not have corresponding data on distribution—that is, we don't know what proportion of employees are paid at the lower end of the salary scale, although on the basis of interview data, we can speculate that most employees would be paid close to the starting salary. The industry generally has a high employee turnover rate, ensuring that most employees will usually be clustered at the starting end of the pay scale. In addition, most of the call centre employees we interviewed had not obtained significant raises, even after several years of employment. Keeping these factors in mind, we propose that the ranges may still be used as a broad indicator of salary rates offered by the industry, but that starting salary rates are likely to be the most representative.

Call centre rates of pay are better than minimum wage in most provinces, but still significantly below the average employment income for Canadians. The mean starting hourly wages reported for permanent, full-time staff were remarkably consistent across study sites, between $12.71 and $12.91. This is the equivalent of an annual income of $24,784, considerably lower than the average employment income of $37,556 for Canadians working full-time in all occupations, and even below the average income for sales and service workers, $28,816. The high end of the pay scale ranged from $16.60/hour in New Brunswick to $29.29/hour in Toronto (where one firm reported an anomalous $125 hourly salary) (Table 4). Call centres employing highly skilled technicians or specialists are more likely to be located in Toronto, which tends to draw the average wage upwards. A higher average wage, however, does not necessarily translate into higher wages for most workers. One needs also to look at the distribution of wages. While our sample was very small, it did reflect the wider trend towards polarized wage rates, meaning that there were few top wages quoted between the low range (in Toronto, $12.50–12.25/hour and the highest rate of $125/hour).

We would expect, and indeed did see, lower salary rates for permanent part-time employees. In New Brunswick and Manitoba, the mean starting part-time salary was significantly lower (less by $2.07 and $2.72/hour respectively–Table 4) than the full-time salary. In Manitoba the temporary part-time salary was the lowest at $8.48/hour. The mean part-time salary for all sites was $11/hour. Assuming that the average part-time worker was employed 21 hours/week,[20] their annual salary would be $12,012. We note that the much lower number of responses received in this category might explain the slightly higher level of salary for temporary workers, both permanent and part-time. In our interviews, many workers employed on a part-time or casual basis in call centres in Toronto, for example, reported starting salaries in the range of $7.00 to $8.25 per hour, rates that simply didn't appear in our management reported statistics.

Finally, we note that although our survey does not allow us to correlate salaries to gender, some relevant information on persistent gender disparities in income can be obtained from 1996 Census data from Statistics Canada. The job categories on the Census do not recognize call centre work as a distinct emerging form of employment, and few of them corresponded well, or at all, with categories of call centre work. However, because the occupation of "survey interviewers and statistical clerks" is most likely these days to be performed almost exclusively over the telephone, it did appear to correspond well enough for comparison. The Census data for that occupational category reveals a gender breakdown compatible with what we found in our survey of all types of call centres, including survey research firms, which we found were most prevalent in Winnipeg. Two-thirds of the approximately 3,300 workers in this category were women. The average employment income was $28,801, slightly higher than the average of starting salaries for call centres. However, men in this category earned considerably more, on average $33,775 vs. $26,047 for their female counterparts. In the much larger occupational category of "sales and service workers" in which three out of every five workers are female, the discrepancy between men's and women's wages was even larger, from $33,828 for men to $20,932 for women.

Given the relatively low income levels we have reported for most call centre jobs, it should not be surprising to find that the labour force is predominately female. Nor should we be surprised at the number of younger workers, or the significant proportion of non-standard employment contracts. What our quantitative research has revealed is the extent to which call centre employment reflects larger statistical trends describing the transformation of labour markets in the new service economy. While our surveys make a contribution by updating and reinforcing existing data on feminization and segmentation of labour markets, we will also argue that the call centre industry might usefully be seen as a microcosm of nation-wide processes of labour market restructuring. If this is the case, the more detailed, qualitative analyses that we undertake in the balance of this report may well be of use for policy making well beyond the telemarketing and teleservice industry.

Table 4. Wages According to Employment Status, Mean and Range, New Brunswick, Winnipeg, Toronto and All, 1998

	Permanent Full-Time		Permanent Part-Time		Temporary Full-Time		Temporary Part-Time	
	Starting Wage	High	Starting Wage	High	Starting Wage	High	Starting Wage	High
New Brunswick								
Mean	12.71	16.60	10.63	14.25	12.47	19.18	14.21	--
Range	8.87–18.35	12.00–25.00	6.50–15.42	11.75–20.00	11.30–14.00	18.35–20.00	13.00–15.42	--
Winnipeg								
Mean	12.71	18.88	9.99	15.94	12.96	20.69	8.48	11.61
Range	7.50–19.50	11.00–35.00	6.00–17.00	8.00–35.00	7.50–18.00	9.50–35.00	6.00–15.00	8.00–17.57
Toronto								
Mean	12.91	29.29	12.85	16.45	13.04	15.75	15.05	15.50
Range	6.35–18.23	12.50–125.00	9.00–18.23	10.80–21.45	11.00–18.23	15.00–16.00	11.00–20.00	15.00–16.00
All (Mean)	12.77	21.78	11.00	15.60	12.83	18.16	11.64	12.72
All (Median)	12.50		10.75		12.50		11.68	

Understanding the Dynamics Behind Labour Market Segmentation

Our survey results provide important information about the composition of the labour force in call centres in the three study sites, as they reveal a significant amount of labour market segmentation, and suggest a degree of polarization as well. However, much crucial information is missing from the picture. This type of information does not help us to explain why labour markets have these characteristics. Nor does it provide any insights into the mechanisms by which women and youth disproportionately find themselves working these jobs or the processes through which their work becomes perceived as less valuable.

Our study relies on a body of interviews with call centre workers in each of the study sites to answer questions that are notoriously complex, multi-layered and bound up with localized labour market practices. In this and subsequent chapters, we will explore further the organization of work in call centres, the way in which employees are trained, supervised and evaluated, and the role of this type of employment in the life histories of workers. We suggest that detailed, qualitative assessments of this type are an important complement to more general quantitative studies, and essential to policy makers seeking to design new approaches to labour market policy in the context of restructuring. Current (market-driven) policy analysis which declines to incorporate the accounts of individual women, their assessment of the available choices and their strategic responses to a world of shifting and limited work opportunities fails to respond to the actual needs of workers as distinct from those of markets. Where governments are facing crises of unemployment, it leads to the hollow celebration of job creation numbers in sharp contrast to the stark realities of daily life in the part-time, low wage, "dead-end" jobs that are being celebrated. And it blocks the ability to appreciate or understand the gendered consequences of the unequal distribution of labour in those new service jobs.

This report will suggest that women working in call centres more often find themselves trapped in employment which neither provides them with adequate wages and working conditions, nor provides a basis of training or opportunities on which to hope for a better future. The dynamics of the industry are such that the "good jobs" are disproportionately distributed to the few young men in the labour force. Our sample of interview subjects tended to be clustered at the lower end of wages for call centres, compared to the incomes that managers reported in our survey. However, when we did encounter an individual working at a centre that was slightly higher paying, the gender order was reversed.

> Benoit: *It's funny, though, because in our call centre, it was overwhelmingly male, but that's because I think the supervisors themselves were kind of chauvinistic, admittedly. They felt that, I guess, in the mutual fund industry specifically . . . . a lot of males had taken the exams relating to mutual funds. They just thought that there were more men first of all, taking these courses, and they would be more experienced and more knowledgeable in investments and how to answer questions regarding money. There were only, when I started, two full-time female reps out of 27. It was overwhelmingly male-*

> *dominated and absurdly enough, the administrative staff is overwhelmingly female.*

In the majority of cases, where study participants reported that they worked mostly with women, we asked for an explanation of the reasons for the gender imbalance in call centre work. Some telephone service representatives were quite explicit about the sexism behind the preference for women in telephone work.

> Tariq: *I think . . . in terms of offices and corporations, most of the real substantive work is done by men. The front-liners are all women. A female's voice sounds nice on the phone. . . . It's almost a sexual preference. In that sense, I think women get the short end of the stick because it almost brings them down to sexual objects, I think. Secretaries, cashiers, blah, blah. . . . I mean, I think we should give women more credit than just pretty faces and nice-sounding voices. No, I think, in that sense, this society has failed women because we keep them confined to public contact sort of positions. There are a lot more women over there.*

Explanations of the predominance of women in inbound and outbound work included gendered assumptions, such as:"Women are more friendly on the phone." In telemarketing positions, some women we spoke with found they could produce more sales by modulating the pitch of their voice when they were selling to a man. Although this often worked to their benefit, enabling them to produce higher sales and earn larger bonuses, the implicit sexism of telephone work was not always benign.

> Maia: *It's not something that you're proud of, but you know that guys will respond to you better if you speak in lower tones like a husky voice. . . . It helps. I mean, well, my boss, jokingly, but he told me I should do phone sex.*

Although the ways in which telephone work is gendered is an important piece of our analysis, to which we will return later in this report, the story behind call centre labour force composition is more complex, localized and multilayered than straightforward gender segmentation. Several call centre employees gave us more detailed observations about the range of individuals at their workplaces.

> Shauna: *Predominately, the women within the (company), or the reps, fall into different categories: you're a student and therefore a part-time worker or you're full-time and within there is also different age groups. As you increase in age—meaning, therefore, that you're no longer a student—they tend to be females. Within the student population that works (here), it's really even—the male-to-female ratio. As you become more of a full-time rep or older, it tends to be predominately women. I don't know if this is because there is—I don't want to say lack of education. I find that a lot of the full-time workers there tend to be women who probably have not progressed*

> *beyond high school or who have families or for some other reason would not be able to find another job.*

During the interviews, we found that although the prevalence towards women and youth was common, there were significant variations in labour force composition between different types of call centres. Some were significantly more female than others; some more heavily weighted towards students. Telemarketing and survey research firms in downtown Toronto, for example, tended to rely heavily on students to fill their stations.

> Cynthia: *[When I was at] X survey research firm, it was notorious for attracting students, and a lot of times, at X firm, the people weren't really serious about doing the work. That was one reason for the high turnover, because the students didn't really care. They come in, and a lot of them have this attitude. Not all of them, but a lot of them did. They had this attitude about their work. It was this "I-don't-care" attitude type thing. So, there was very high turnover. There were a lot of teenagers and I felt as though I was the oldest person there.*
>
> Interviewer: *You're not very old?*
>
> Cynthia: *No, I'm 29. Now, at this telephone banking centre, it's an older crowd. People are a lot more serious about their jobs. We're working with an older crowd. There are people in their 20s. People in their 30s working for this firm and a couple of older people. It's mostly 20s and 30s. It's more serious. Students and people who are trying to make ends meet and stuff.*
>
> Louise: *If there were a 100 people on their rolls, a good 75 percent are probably students—university students or college. The other remaining percentages are people who have fallen through the cracks of the work force. You can almost tell that they're supplementing their income or they can't find anything else.*

Although our interviews in Toronto were heavily weighted towards students, some firms in Winnipeg and New Brunswick also relied on a fluctuating part-time or temporary student work force.[21] Students tend to want to work part-time, and to be more amenable to shift-work, which makes them attractive for employers looking for a more "flexible" work force. However, they also tend to have higher turnover rates. For example, one interview subject reported that in-house data at his Toronto survey research firm showed that the average length of employment there was 2 to 2.5 months. We encountered even more specific work force orientations in a few centres, such as several firms in Winnipeg with a large proportion of gay, lesbian or bisexual workers, or the fund-raising centre in Toronto that employed a high proportion of women of East Indian background. These suggest that local networks and social connections play an important role in the distribution of jobs among those at the periphery of labour markets. Many call centres, particularly those at the lower end of the pay

scale with highest rates of turnover, provide cash incentives to employees who bring in friends or family to work at the firm.

> Interviewer: *Does the call centre have a hard time getting people?*
>
> Phyllis: *No, because there's so many people out of work. And, you know, they don't have to advertise, it's word of mouth. If I said: "Oh, I know a girl that could go in there and do that." I'd get paid $50. They pay $50 to everyone.*
>
> Interviewer: *For referrals?*
>
> Phyllis: *Yes. As long as they stay, I think it's a month. So, that way, they don't have to advertise. But you know, you could go out there now and get loads of people, but it's not helping the economy any because those people will only last as long as they can, you know.*

As Saskia Sassen has pointed out in a discussion of immigrant workers, these practices can amount to a "displacement of traditional labour-market functions such as recruitment, screening and training from the labour market and the firm to the community or household" (Sassen, 1998 p.147). She also has observed the extent to which these distinctive localized labour markets have the effect of restricting job opportunities for these workers. This discussion of the impact of social networks on the composition of labour forces reveals the significance of the social processes by which individuals come to call centre work. This "social fabric" of the labour market determines the availability of avenues to better opportunities for some workers while creating obstacles for others.

Getting In: Exploring the Entry Points to Call Centre Employment

We have emphasized the extent to which call centres draw on individuals who already find themselves on the periphery of the labour market for some reason. Some of our interview subjects explicitly identified call centre work as "marginalized," while others simply explained that they did it as a "last resort." Many call centre jobs are relatively easy and quick to get, and require no training or experience. They are attractive, therefore, to those who had an immediate need for income and saw the work as a quick fix until something better came along. Most often, these people were women and youth.

> Claudine: *I think because women who want to go back into the work force find themselves primarily in service-driven industries. If you are a woman who has been a stay-at-home mom or a stay-at-home housewife, and didn't have a lot of skills and wants to go into the work force, sometimes places like this seem like the logical progression into something else. Sometimes women use it as a stepping stone, hoping for something else.*

People found themselves resorting to telephone work when other options and avenues into the labour market had failed them. For some, periods of call centre work alternated with

employment insurance (when they could qualify) or social assistance; for others, it was a way to avoid that avenue.

> Claudine: *I stuck it out for eight months. I was sort of biding my time until I found something else, which was this job in youth advocacy. I used this job as a stepping stone so that I didn't find myself running out of unemployment, and then onto welfare and that sort of trap that women often find themselves in. So, this was an opportunity to bridge that gap until something else came along.*

> Shauna: *I needed a job . . . . coming off an unsuccessful stint at company Y, and it was close to where I lived. It was just a matter of, you wandered in and you got a job there. I wasn't looking for a specific job in that area.*

Many of those we spoke to in call centre work had done or contemplated other low wage service work, including restaurant work and retail. Some who tried call centre work ended up returning to those other options. Many emphasized that call centre work, although it may appear to be a step up the ladder from other types of service work, is really just another low-wage job.

> Lisa: *I needed a part-time job, and my mom was a single parent, and I was old enough to work, and I needed a part-time job now and the only thing that was hiring was McDonalds. I ate at McDonalds and I had a friend tell me that if I started to work at McDonalds, I wouldn't eat there anymore because I'd know what went into the burgers, and I would know what happened to the burgers and I would be grossed out. I liked McDonalds, and I didn't want to do that. I don't like the food business. . . . I started off doing fund-raising, fund-raising for different charities. I sold stuff, credit cards, but that's why I got into it. Not because I like it . . . but because it was the only thing that I didn't have to have experience for.*

Yet many of the people with whom we spoke did not conform to the stereotype of a call centre employee as unskilled and not well educated, revealing the extent to which economic restructuring has limited employment options for skilled workers in a variety of fields.

> Benoit: *The only reason I took this call centre work was because I'd had so much trouble finding other laboratory positions and oddly enough, the majority of people in the call centre had backgrounds where you'd think: "Why are you here in a call centre?" Some had chemistry backgrounds, engineering backgrounds, physics backgrounds and teaching backgrounds, journalism backgrounds but they were just having so much trouble finding positions in their own fields that they needed something to do each day and needed money, so they took this job. It was quite interesting, actually, to find that out.*

One woman who had a successful career as an executive secretary in government found herself doing telemarketing work after an economic downturn.

> Sylvia: *I'm doing it out of necessity because the last few years in Manitoba, the economy a few years ago was really bad; the only kind of a job you could get was a term position so I was getting term positions here, term positions there. My last term position started out as a six-month term and ended up being two years, and then it was over. . . . I applied for 200 positions at least, and I could not find anything in my field. . . . So, I did something that I swore I would never do and applied for a telemarketing job, which I got.*

An important insight flows from the evidence we have gathered on "who finds themselves doing call centre work?" and "how they got there?" It contrasts with one justification offered for government support of low wage call centres, as well as the encouragement of more value added centres. In an interview, Frank McKenna, the former New Brunswick premier who spearheaded the call centre development strategy in that province, put it this way: "But . . . you have to remember, you need jobs for every skill set, and every socio-economic group. An outbound centre that pays $8.50 an hour doesn't sound great unless you compare it to a fish plant job at $5.25 an hour."[22] Mr. McKenna's approach overlooks the extent to which global economic restructuring itself is bringing about dramatic changes to both the distribution of skills and socio-economic class in Canadian society.[23] Government support (whether tacit or explicit) of an expanding market for low-skilled and low-paying jobs primarily occupied by women, appears more likely to exacerbate macro-level tendencies towards polarized labour markets than to reduce existing disparities in income and opportunity. However, in the "jobs-for-every-skill-set" approach, one takes these market-created disparities in income and opportunity as given, and encourages firms to benefit from targeting individuals with few other employment options.

3. GOOD JOBS/BAD JOBS

> Simon: *Oh yeah, let me make that clear. TELEMARKETING IS A BAD JOB.*
>
> Melissa: *Z is a great company . . . they treat the people very well. They're so friendly there. They bend over backwards to accommodate me.*

This report has already identified a marked trend towards the polarization of labour markets in the growing service sector. According to the ECC, a number of factors have led to this increasing segmentation.

> We have also found evidence of segmentation in terms of earnings, skill content, job stability, and the location of employment. Two quite distinct "growth poles" account for virtually all of the employment expansion in the 1980s: one includes highly skilled, well-compensated, stable jobs, while the other consists of non-standard jobs with relatively low levels of compensation and stability. The implication of our research is that the labour market is offering economic security to fewer Canadians (ECC, 1990, p. 17).

So, in the new service economy, a "good job" tends to require information-based skills, is full-time and well-remunerated, while a "bad job" is characterized by lower pay and non-standard forms of employment, including part-time, temporary or temp-agency work. The ECC also observed that youth and women tended to be concentrated in the "bad jobs" (ECC, 1990, p. 11).

In our second chapter, we examined labour force composition to determine whether employment in call centres reflected these larger trends. We also began to investigate the avenues through which women and youth came to call centre employment at higher rates than others. The chapter began to debunk market-driven assumptions about the "fit" between call centre jobs and those who perform them. It argued, instead, that call centres are part of a restructuring process that is transforming the market for labour in ways that would impact negatively on Canadians already disadvantaged in labour markets. This section of the report takes that analysis further by investigating whether call centres reflect the tendency towards a growing divide between "good jobs" and "bad jobs." As the quotations above suggest, the workers to whom we spoke varied significantly in their assessments of call centre employment. The wage data reported in chapter two, which the interviews supported, reveal that call centres differ widely in terms of wages, conditions of employment, and workplace organization and practice.

Inbound vs. Outbound Call Centres

Functionally, call centres can operate in one of two ways. Inbound centres generally receive and service calls from existing or prospective clients, while outbound centres perform a range of operations including telemarketing, survey research and fund-raising. Call centres may combine both sales and service functions—for example, where teleservice banking

representatives are required to sell mutual funds to every telebanking customer; or where teleservice representatives for a hotel chain are evaluated on the proportion of their calls that result in a confirmed reservation. Our survey data revealed that inbound centres make up the majority of operations in the industry, totalling 61 percent. The proportion of inbound/outbound centres was notably different in Winnipeg than in the two other study sites, however, with only 43 percent of centres dealing solely with inbound calls (Table 5). In 1995, a Canada-wide industry survey reported a much higher proportion of call centres taking both inbound and outbound calls (48 percent), with a stronger prevalence of mostly inbound applications (44 percent) over mostly outbound (8 percent).[24]

During our interviews, we quickly discovered that whether someone worked at an inbound or an outbound centre appeared to have a significant impact on everything from reported salary to office ergonomics. Workers generally considered inbound, or customer service, centres to be the more desirable jobs because they were easier and the pay was better. In contrast, workers considered outbound centres, particularly telemarketing, less desirable, because they involved harder work for less pay (often some pay was incentive or performance based), and they often relied primarily on part-time or casual employees. Workers in outbound centres often expressed a desire to move to inbound work.

> Shauna: *It is a very high turnover in telemarketing companies because they are pressure cookers, for one thing, and it is very tiring when you are phoning up people who really don't want to talk to you. That is why if I stay with the calling, I'd like to get an inbound.*

> Randy: *In terms of the subjective comparison, I think I would much rather be in a retail, not necessarily restaurant, but retail environment. Again, that has a same comparison with the inbound/outbound. I think inbound call centre work is very similar to retail sales. I think it sort of functions in the same sort of way. People come looking for a service. They're not in person—they're on the phone. Outbound is akin to the door-to-door salesman going around selling vacuum cleaners or encyclopaedias.*

Table 5. Type of Operation, New Brunswick, Winnipeg, Toronto and All, 1998

	Inbound		Outbound		Both	
New Brunswick	14	(74 percent)	2	(11 percent)	3	(16 percent)
Winnipeg	9	(43 percent)	8	(38 percent)	4	(19 percent)
Toronto	10	(71 percent)	1	(7 percent)	3	(21 percent)
All	33	(61 percent)	11	(20 percent)	10	(18 percent)

There were some significant differences in wage rates between the two types of centres, but only in the non-standard types of employment. For the permanent full-time employees, the differences were negligible. However, dramatic differences in wage rates appeared when inbound and outbound centres were compared for permanent part-time and temporary part-time employees. Inbound call centres paid permanent part-time employees $12.20/hour, on average—only slightly lower than the full-time rate. However, outbound centres paid their permanent part-time staff only $6.93/hour, almost half the full-time rate. For temporary part-

time workers in inbound centres, the average hourly rate actually went up to $15.00/hour, while in outbound centres it lowered slightly, to $6.75/hour (Table 6).

Table 6. Hourly Starting Wage, Standard and Non-Standard by Type of Call Centre

	Standard	Non-Standard
Inbound	12.50	13.05
Outbound	12.69	6.91
Both in and out	12.97	12.69

Although the inbound/outbound distinction does seem to make a difference, both in terms of employment and hourly wages, our interviews revealed that inbound and outbound jobs didn't always neatly fall out along a "good jobs"/"bad jobs" divide. While outbound centres predictably offered more part-time, lower paid and quota-driven work, few of the inbound jobs we heard about could be described as "good" in the terms that the ECC used. While inbound centres are more likely to offer a few "good jobs," many of the inbound employees we spoke with are poorly paid, subjected to random monitoring, arbitrary quantitative evaluations and demanding performance criteria. While the distinction between inbound and outbound is not as neat as we might have anticipated, it is a useful heuristic for revealing in more detail the dynamics of labour market segmentation. In the balance of this chapter, we provide a qualitative assessment of what factors make some call centre jobs "good" and others "bad."

Outbound Call Centres: Sweatshops of the 90s?

Although they varied in the degree of their criticism, our interview subjects were fairly consistent in their negative assessment of outbound call centre work. We wanted to better understand, however, the ingredients that went into making it a "bad job." We found that four strong narratives on this theme ran through our interviews. First, the jobs were difficult to do because of high performance standards based on quotas. Second, the pay was low, there was little or no job security, and there were limited hours of work, due to the widespread use of non-standard employment contracts. Third, workers encountered ethical dilemmas in high-pressure sales and survey environments. Finally, little training was offered, and there were generally few avenues for self-improvement or advancement.

Quotas were common, and much-disliked, features of outbound telephone work. Workers frequently commented that the quotas were too high or arbitrary.

> Cynthia: *There is pressure to get the quotas. They say that they're not really interested in numbers. They say that they are more into quality. Well, that is a lie. They are usually more into numbers than anything.*

In both telephone sales and fund-raising, returns depended to a great extent on the areas into which the calls were being (automatically) dialled. Depending on the "list" one was given,

meeting quota could be relatively easy or almost impossible. Outbound employees became resentful when they perceived that performance standards were set unfairly high.

> Ben: *The expectation is quite high, and the percentages . . . I've been angry the last couple of nights. I've been really, really pissed off that they're putting the expectations of sales on us knowing full well the general neighbourhoods that we're calling. Frustrated, also, because I'm trying to make sales, but the communication isn't happening.*

In many outbound centres, the challenge of meeting performance standards was directly linked to the possibility of ongoing work. Employers increase the "flexibility" of their work force by combining already-insecure terms of employment with difficult-to-meet standards. In a centre where the majority of employees were hired on a "casual" basis, for example, the consequence of not meeting such a quota would be a diminishment of scheduled work hours for that employee, to the extent that someone might see their name disappear from the schedule altogether. When this happens, the casual worker has little redress, either against the employer or from a restructured employment insurance plan that has raised the bar for most part-time workers, in terms of number of work hours required to qualify for assistance.

> Marco: *That's the legal trick. You can't be employed. I'm actually not employed at all. I am not a full-time worker. I'm not a part-time worker. I'm casual worker. It means that I have no benefits and rights like regular workers . . . 434 of the interviewers are casual workers. Some of them have worked for eight years. . . .Next week, there could be no job at all. That happened quite a few times.*

We sometimes observed that by giving the more difficult lists to "undesirable" employees, employers could then use their resulting failure to meet quota as a way of getting rid of those who demonstrated inclinations towards workplace organizing, for example. While those types of practices are difficult to confirm, failure to meet quotas was certainly a common justification for (not-infrequent) layoffs in these workplaces.

> Melissa: *They said they laid people off by a conversion rate. A conversion rate is the ratio of incoming calls versus sales. And if you didn't have a high enough conversion rate, then you were . . . that was the bottom. You were out.*

Several employees suggested that some outbound firms actually depend on a high turnover of employees to keep their productivity rates high. This approach was commonplace in downtown Toronto, where the high density of population and firms helped to facilitate the movement of people from firm to firm with great regularity. One high school student to whom we spoke had already worked at nine outbound centres in her two-year, part-time working life. One former telemarketing employee in Toronto observed that for some outbound employers, the ideal employment flexibility includes the right to organize a workplace around high turnover, to hire and fire at will.

> Rosa: *They're talking about hiring and firing people. That's what they mean by flexibility. I think that's the only thing it means. They count on a high turnover because of the way this business is run, there is a very high burnout level. People burnout very quickly because of the stress, because of the pressure, because of the way people are treated, because of the degrading nature of the work. They burnout. So, they want to be able to fire somebody, whether they burnout after two months or 10 months, they want to be able to fire them. . . .*

Local labour market practices were quite different in New Brunswick, where people tended to stick with a job once they got one. Those inbound firms that invested more in training and benefited from low turnover perceived this as an advantage. It appeared to cause problems, however, for the few firms that ordinarily depended on high turnover rates to achieve higher productivity, by keeping the stations filled with eager, energetic newcomers.

> Melissa: *The problem with XYZ is that it is a company that depends on high turnover. They tell you when you're hired that approximately half the people won't be working in the following year. Because they expect that high turnover rate, and when they didn't get it here in New Brunswick, they had to do layoffs.*

Many telemarketing jobs are part-time for the same reason that they are high turnover; it is difficult for employees to maintain their performance at the standards demanded for any length of time. Full-time telemarketers appear to face the highest risk of burnout, as our chapter examining workplace stress will illustrate. Assuming you manage to keep your job, however, making ends meet on the hours you get working at an outbound call centre is not easy.

> Cynthia: *I mean, a lot of these telemarketing jobs, people have to have another job during the day because they just don't pay enough. Where I am working right now, I am making $13 an hour, but it still isn't enough because I only get 27 hours in a week. . . . I'm actually trying to find something during the day because of 27 hours. I live by myself. I've got to pay rent. 27 hours is not enough to pay all the bills...67 percent of my pay cheque is going towards my rent.*

One interview subject in Toronto found that she had to work extremely hard to earn consistently between $12 and $13/hour at her part-time telemarketing job.

> Maia: *This was four hours a night. It doesn't add up to what someone at even $8 an hour, 40 hours a week would make. They make more than what I would be making even working really, really, really hard on the phone four hours a night, five nights a week. It wasn't everyone that was making lots of money. It was just some people. There was a lot of apathy because it's a sort of going-nowhere job. . . . They don't have a certain goal to look to. I was saving money for tuition, so I was willing to do well.*

Earnings can be variable in these jobs, a fact that makes financial planning difficult. Some firms (inbound and outbound) would send employees home before the end of their scheduled shifts if their performance or demand were low.

> Melissa: *You don't really work 24 hours a week because they have "mandatory home earlies." . . . If they don't have the calls to support people, they send you home and they don't pay you for the rest of the shift. . . . I was fortunate in that I was living at home, but I don't know how people that had to pay for rent and kids managed it. I still don't know how they manage it. Because when it's dead, they have no qualms about sending you home. And my friend, L, actually just got sent home. She only worked for an hour and a half. And they didn't pay her any more than that.*

The third reason that workers found high-pressure sales and survey environments very difficult was the conflict between the employer-driven pressure to make a sale and a personal sense of responsibility towards the customers not to misrepresent the products. Through the high quotas that were set, employers downloaded the burden of ethical responsibility onto the callers themselves, turning a blind eye to those who performed well by engaging in questionable practices. While some callers managed to negotiate these dilemmas by accepting that they would produce less and refusing to hard sell certain products or to certain people, it usually ended up costing them.

> Randy: *The people who got the incentives, generally, were people who didn't follow the book. You would be assessed on how well you stayed scripted and all that sort of stuff, and I was always great with that, but in terms of actually going and doing what you were supposed to do, if you stayed exactly with what you were supposed to do, you wouldn't get sales. These other people did all sorts of crazy stuff. God knows if they even lied. I don't know. They got the sales. They got the money. It always seemed like a small group of people and I was never willing to do that.*

While outbound centres that conducted survey research didn't usually present the same kind of dilemmas, both tele-fund-raising and telemarketing centres appeared to present difficult-to-handle ethical dilemmas for many callers. While it should be emphasized that not all call centres encouraged or tolerated unethical practices, our interviews revealed a spectrum from the "hard-sell" script that not everyone felt comfortable with to one or two clearly fraudulent operations.[25]

> Paul: *They wanted you to sell a lot more stuff and to go up to the line, as far as truthful representation of the product basically. . . . I found that very difficult to do.*
>
> Interviewer: *So how did you reconcile that?*
>
> Paul: *I needed the money.*

> Phyllis: *That's tough to put on a worker, you know? Everybody's got a conscience. And I just think that these companies don't think of people as having a conscience. And having to go home and sleep at night.*

The last theme our interviews raised with outbound workers about what made these jobs so undesirable concerned training and advancement. Very little training is offered in most outbound centres—firms rely upon the personal communication skills workers bring to the jobs. The training programs tend to be brief, one or two days at most, and narrowly focused on product information, rather than on more general skills. In addition, the training that is provided is frequently unpaid, and workers may have to purchase their own equipment.

> Margaret: *In fact, you get exactly one day of training, and it is on your own time—eight hours. There was a rumour that you got paid for this, but you don't. You spend the last couple of hours on the phone and then at the end they say: "If you think you can hack it, come back tomorrow."*

> Fred: *We're going for training, two days training. It was very simple and generic. But they said: "Look, you will have to buy your headset". . . and I thought, wow, like chintzy, you know, what's up with that?*

While outbound centres in all study sites tended to combine at least several of these factors, not all outbound employees were equally dissatisfied with their work. Levels of dissatisfaction varied between individuals as well as between study sites. On the whole, New Brunswickers were less inclined to criticize their jobs than workers in Winnipeg or Toronto. However, when asked, the majority still preferred inbound work to outbound.

The Inbound Call Centre: Better, but Where Are the "Good Jobs?"

The data from our mail survey of call centre managers revealed that inbound centres are more common than outbound centres, and that some inbound centres pay relatively high salaries to their employees. However, inbound jobs were generally less well represented in our interview samples from Winnipeg and Toronto, and higher-paying "good jobs," inbound or outbound, infrequently appear in our interviews. The reasons for this are unclear. It is possible that we missed a large sector of call centre workers in our sampling methods in the three sites. Higher-skilled, better-paid call centre workers may not have been employed in the downtown locations where we recruited. They may have driven to work rather than taking transit, where our posters were more clearly visible. They may have felt more loyalty towards their employer or did not think that their job would be included in a research study on "call centres."[26] Despite these differences between our interview sample and the composition of call centres in the three sites, however, we did manage to interview a number of individuals who did do inbound work. It is on the basis of these interviews that we can proceed to analyze why inbound call centres are generally better workplaces, even if they don't appear to match the ideal type of "good job" in the new service economy.

If we review the four things that made outbound work unattractive, we will see that practices in inbound centres represent an improvement, in most respects. First, regarding training and opportunities for advancement, inbound centres were clearly superior. Generally, for inbound work, the training periods were longer, between two and four weeks, and it was almost always paid. Some firms even encouraged employees to undertake skills upgrading, either by offering courses internally or subsidizing course work outside the firm.

> Shauna: *The whole system is computerized. I don't think that's the reason why I've become technically proficient. It's because the company does offer you the chance to go and take computer courses . . . all the different companies within the organization utilize a certain system. They offer computer courses which are related to those specific areas. If you want, you can take advantage of that or not.*

Of course, the reason firms were more likely to be willing to train employees better and to subsidize ongoing skills development is related to the nature of the employment contract. Our interview subjects doing inbound work were also more often permanent full-time employees. They also earned a substantially higher hourly wage. The expectation was that these employees would be with the firm for some time. Many inbound centres are in-house customer service bureaus for larger companies. Those firms tend to have more entrenched practices regarding internal advancement of employees, so that available positions are advertised within the firm first. Employees get a sense, which the employer encourages, that they may eventually have opportunities to move to positions beyond the telephones. In contrast, many outbound jobs tend to be found in independently managed call centres that obtain work on a contract basis from a range of organizations. In those environments, one is not able to gain the same sense of loyalty, of being part of a larger team that the in-house operations are able to foster.

> Melissa: *As long as you're a regular employee, you can apply for any job within Firm X, as long as you've got the training.*
>
> Interviewer: *Would they support you in terms of getting associated training and developing yourself?*
>
> Melissa: *Very much so, they're very big on developing skills at Firm X. They want you to learn as much as you can, and they support you very much in that.*

One outbound worker employed by a large firm that ran its own call centre sales operation in-house spoke of the same type of opportunities.

> Donald: *One of the advantages is that . . . a lot of the people who started out at the beginning have gotten management positions. They have healthy salaries, healthy management jobs . . . that really you could spend the rest of your working career here and maybe even get transferred higher up in the company . . . There's a lot of room to move around in the company. If you*

> *get up there, there are a lot of possibilities. It's basically just surviving through the grunt work because the policy is you start at the bottom.*

In addition, inbound work was often described as less stressful than outbound, because of the different dynamic of the customer contact in the calls. It was not always the case, however, that customers calling a centre for a service were more polite and respectful on the telephone than those being asked to buy something, answer questions or donate money. "Irates," callers who are very angry with the company, are common to the experience of both inbound and outbound workers, and may even present more of a problem for customer service representatives, who must try to avoid further alienating that particular customer. On the other hand, in the majority of calls to inbound centres, there is usually a service that the representative can perform for the customer that gives a measure of job satisfaction.

> Ann: *I'm able to connect with learners and volunteers even at the beginning when you're initiating to look for where you are trying to go. I think that is the key. . . . It is just trying to keep looking at what we're doing, and keep examining and thinking about how we're serving people, and if this is the best way to do it.*

In addition, the difficulty and stress associated with inbound work can vary widely, depending on the degree and type of performance evaluations that employers use. To measure employee performance, most inbound centres use both the periodic random monitoring of calls and quantitative indicators, such as "in-line time" (the proportion of a shift the caller is available to take calls). Qualitative indicators of good service, such as written evaluations from customers, are rarely emphasized. Although the types of ethical dilemmas discussed above do not seem to face inbound workers, many do experience a gap between their own views of good service and the demands of their employers to keep calls short (reduce "talk time"), to engage in "upselling" or to minimize time not spent on the phones. In subsequent chapters, we will deal in more detail with these issues of stress, monitoring and professional service. For the purposes of this chapter, it is sufficient to point out that while inbound jobs do pay better wages and often offer full-time, longer-term employment contracts, they can be stressful and difficult to perform. Even if firms are willing to keep people in permanent telephone service positions, as our subsequent chapters will indicate, there is no guarantee that these employees will be willing or able to stay with the work over the longer term.

Conclusion: What Is a "Good Job?"

> Louise: *For me? Something that uses my brain, at this point. Either something that makes money or that uses my brain. I would really like that. I don't know quite what all that would be. I would like some kind of a research job. I would take anything at this point that has me doing something. . . . This is a job, I guess, and I always joke that it's slave labour, and it's not, obviously, but it can be brain numbing.*

While many outbound centres provide employment that clearly fits into the category of "bad jobs" described by the ECC, we were unable to speak with anyone working at a call centre who clearly fell within the Council's definition of a "good job." Better jobs were found at many call centres, however, both inbound and to a lesser extent, outbound. An important difference between some in-house inbound jobs and others was the perception that there were opportunities to advance within the firm to non-call centre jobs. While it is not clear how many call centre employees were able to advance beyond the phones (we did not speak with anyone to whom this had happened), the interviews did contain descriptions of people who worked in call centres at bigger firms moving into good jobs within those firms. We have more evidence of people who were able to move from "bad" outbound jobs to better inbound jobs, but no farther.

What about the woman above who would like to "use her brain" at work? Are there call centres that might offer her a "good job?" While our direct evidence of "good jobs" in call centres is limited, our view is that those inbound jobs which require more technically skilled individuals, such as technical support, tend to draw on a labour pool that is distinct from the one that we investigated in this study. There is a chasm between regular and skilled call centre work and poor mobility between the two. It is cheaper and easier to hire skilled employees directly into those positions that require them, rather than training existing employees. Further, as we indicated in chapter two, this aspect of occupational segregation by skill was highly gendered. Women tended not to enter call centre work on this privileged basis, but to be clustered on the bottom rungs of the employment ladder. While this is a topic for further investigation, we would suggest that those call centres that do provide "good jobs," unlike the majority that we investigated in our study, are likely to employ more men than women.

4. THE SERVICE FACTORY

> Randy: *I don't think there is anything necessarily horrible about working for a call centre now. I think it is part of modern life, and I think people who don't think that the telephone is part of . . . modern life . . . are left behind. . . . Anybody who thinks that they'd be fine without anything relating to the phone, well, they're wrong.*
>
> Benoit: *I know that companies love call centres. They think it is so efficient. It is great. They can set up in no time. Very streamlined operation. It really does run well, even though there are problems. Sure, there are problems, but I can see why companies love call centres. It's just a really great way to organize things. On the phone now, it is so high tech. It is a great way to do business.*

In our last two chapters, relying on our own survey results as well as those industry studies that were available to us, we began to draw a picture of the rapidly growing call centre industry in Canada. We have been able to outline some of the most salient features of call centre work: the composition of its labour force, the forms of employment contracts, the wages paid, and the distinction between in-house and outbound work. In exploring the economic and social differences between doing sales or service work over the telephone, we are underlining the importance to policy makers of recognizing the dramatic variations between different types of call centres. We will argue that the "one size fits all" approach to local economic development through the promotion of call centre businesses is dangerous for this reason.

Notwithstanding these important variations in pay, terms of employment and conditions of work, our interviews also revealed a set of core commonalties among the experiences of call centre employees. The worker is almost continuously on the telephone, with automated dialling or call-switching technology providing an unbroken flow of calls. Usually, the number of calls dealt with, their average length and the number of sales are precisely measured, and individual productivity statistics recorded and subject to examination on a daily basis. Whether in service, sales or survey research, the call centre worker is engaged in a series of often-difficult and sensitive micro-interactions with individual customers, in which a positive message about the company for which he or she works must be effectively delivered in a very brief time span. Often, call centre employees are put in a position where they must placate upset or angry customers (or potential customers), although they generally have very little authority or autonomy to rectify problems. All of these factors contribute to the stressful nature of this type of employment, and to a relatively high level of employee burnout and turnover in the industry.

This chapter describes the daily realities of teleservice work at call centres in Canada. We describe in more detail the sources of stress in these jobs, which led most of our interview participants to identify it as the dominant feature of their work. First, we explore the physical

demands of this type of work, and some of the health effects that workers experience. Second, we review some common industry stressors, including pressures to sell in telemarketing environments; uses of information technologies for surveillance of employees and quantitative evaluation of employee productivity; and rigid enforcement of the appearance of workers whom clients never see, including "professional" dress codes.

Worker "burnout" is the most common effect of cumulative job stress in the industry. People simply decide that they can no longer do the work and have to look for something else. We examine the ways in which firms cope with, and in some cases, even come to rely on a short working life span for most employees. On the other hand, there are many service firms that are searching for ways to retain staff over the longer term through organizational initiatives aimed at reducing stress. Although some stresses are an inevitable feature of this type of work, our research suggests that it is possible to structure call centre workplaces in ways which are not as damaging to the longer term health and coping skills of employees.

Sweatshops of the 90s? Call Centre Workers Under Stress

As noted above, job stress was the most important concern that our interview participants raised about their work. The most commented-upon effects of stress were both physical and emotional or mental fatigue. Several workers related stories of emotional or health crises precipitated by call centre work, and mental health issues were frequently discussed.

> Benoit: *Midway through a shift, it was very tiring. I definitely noticed a difference in this job in comparison to other jobs that I've had. At the end of the day, I never felt this way compared to other jobs that I've had. I just had an incredible amount of . . . I was very fatigued. I found myself irritable a lot. . . . I think it was more mental exhaustion that just physical exhaustion. That took over my whole physical well being. Mental fatigue.*

In addition to mental fatigue and physical exhaustion, both in-house and outbound workers can become emotionally drained from telephone work. In sales and survey centres, the number of rejections one experiences in a day of non-stop calling can become difficult to handle, while teleservice workers are frequently called upon to cope graciously with the hostility of angry customers, or "irates."

> Jacqueline: *When you phone someone and you go through your spiel, and they say something really rude to you and you just got to go: "Okay, well thank you very much," and then just click and then just go onto the next thing without even kind of dealing with it all, just like a robot.*

The difficulty of coping with the stressful nature of the work is compounded, in many cases, by the public construction of the work as unskilled. Since no particular qualifications are required, the implicit assumption is that anyone should be able to do it, that it is not that difficult. And yet, workers and management both agree that call centre work "is not for everyone." Difficulties in coping with these jobs can embarrass workers, particularly young

people, for whom it may be a first job. As we will discuss later in this report, unreasonable demands made on employees in some (outbound) call centre jobs can be particularly damaging to the self-esteem of younger workers.

> Lana: *After the holidays, I do plan to take stress leave just because I don't want to get to the point that I'm, whatever. I feel like a loser. I do. I feel like a loser because I'm only 22, and I have got to take stress leave . . . feel that I can't handle life or something. Too bad that there's those negative feelings about it because I'm not a loser. I know I'm not a loser.*

> Margaret: *I have seen people start nerve pills, I have seen people walking out of there crying. . . . And the only thing that really bothers me is that my son is going to be 16 this year and if he was ever going to work in a call centre, I would want to know, especially if it was going to be his first job.*

The human body can become unable to continue to perform the work required at some call centres, particularly after an extended period of employment of a year or more. When productivity demands are too high or stringently enforced, employees' stress levels can reach crisis points. It is important that this is recognized as a workplace health and safety issue in this industry. Paul and Phyllis each suffered "breakdowns" on the job, which caused them to stop doing call centre work, and left them with lasting mental or physical health problems. Other workers we interviewed who were still doing call centre work referred to the "pressure cooker" environment of their workplaces, or talked about how the work was making them crazy.

> Paul: *But this was really bad and I started crying, and they asked me if I was all right, and I said "No." They said that they would try and find some work for me in quality control, reviewing tapes of transactions. . . . After about a month, they said I could come back to work on the phones or I could resign from the company. . . . With our wonderful new U.I.* [Unemployment Insurance*] regulations, if you resign, you can't collect a dime. So I was stuck. I went back, I lasted less than a week. . . . What happened then? I was under a doctor's care for a while for anxiety and depression. They had me on some medication . . . . It happened at work . . . the stress was really getting to me. A couple of times, they sent me home early because I was just not coping. Each time, it got worse.*

> Phyllis: *The day that I actually collapsed it was just . . . you could just . . . any agent in there could tell you. Management knew that they should have cut the lines down. They should have slowed the records down.*

The potential danger of some of the most high-stress call centre environments was dramatically illustrated by the experience of Phyllis in New Brunswick. She suffered a severe attack of high blood pressure while working in a high-volume telemarketing centre, causing her to be taken out of work on a stretcher. She had been a top performer at the firm, but was no longer able to work there because of her health.

> Phyllis: *I had no lunch. They didn't allow us any lunch that day. It was too busy. See, they were just seeing dollar signs. Sales, sales, sales like crazy. . . . And the next thing I knew, I just went to my supervisor and said: "I gotta go outside, I gotta go outside." Oh, I didn't want to go but I had to, I couldn't handle it . . . . I got that I could hardly stand up, so I came back inside and sat down on the stairs. And that was it. I just passed right out. And then I couldn't talk. . . . I was that close to a stroke . . . and my doctor told me not to go back. He said you just can't. He said if you want to kill yourself, go back.*

Most of the stress in call centre work can be attributed to two things: the monotony and repetition involved in dealing with high volumes of calls and the cumulative emotional demands presented by the interpersonal nature of the work. In order to protect call centre workers, most of whom are women who may well be coping with additional stressors in their lives outside work, employers need to acknowledge each of these stressors and make efforts to manage them effectively. On an individual level, our informants observed that many call centre managers either choose to ignore or deal inadequately with these aspects of the work. As we pointed out in chapter three, many firms appear to have adopted an approach to management which places extremely high demands on workers, which inevitably result in a quick turnover of employees. Since people's productivity tends to go down after three to six months in these high-pressure sales jobs, firms count on "using people up" as quickly as possible so that they can be replaced with new and eager recruits before their productivity declines, and often even before they attract the protection of provincial labour and employment laws.

Uses of New Information Technologies

As we have described, the pace of call centre work is usually controlled by a combination of information and communication technologies that deliver calls to a worker's headset and account information to the computer screen at her/his station. At busy call centres, the next call will be delivered immediately upon disengagement from the previous one. It was this aspect of the work that led to the use of descriptions such as: "exhausting," "robotic," "controlled" and "machine-like." This section explores the stresses reported by workers that appeared to be technology-related. In trying to describe what she experienced as the dehumanizing effect of the technologies in her workplace, one of our interview subjects referred us to the essay *On Technology* by German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) that discusses his concept of the worker as "the standing reserve."

> Rosa: *You are standing waiting to be used by the technology, and it's a physical embodiment of that. You are standing, waiting until that call comes in to use you to make money. And you are simply another part of that machine.*

It is important to understand how new information technologies have altered the working lives of those who do sales and provide services over the telephone. New technologies

allowing the automation of calls have resulted in a fundamental transformation of call centre work, making it more profitable for firms but also more difficult for workers. Anthony, one of our subjects, worked in a market research firm for over eight years, beginning as a caller, and becoming a first-level supervisor. He explains the early years of his job.

> Anthony: *It was not a high-pressure situation at all. I don't remember anyone being reprimanded for doing or not doing their work . . . it was just phones and we did it on paper. Just pencil and paper. We had to rotate the options so that we could be statistically accurate.*

The computers at many call centres pace the work speed and have resulted in a significant amount of "speed up" in telephone work. One technology that most outbound call centres now use is a predictive dialer. The predictive dialer keeps dialling numbers automatically, and routing the connected calls to available agents. Similarly, for an in-house centre, automatic call routing or switching ensures that agents are kept supplied with calls. One outcome of both of these technologies is that workers are usually unable to take short breaks between calls; if they do so, they can be penalized. Yet, the ability to take short breaks when needed was identified by our informants as one of the best ways for them to reduce stress.

> Donald: *Unlike other retail sales jobs, there is never any break except when your scheduled breaks are, because except for the 15 minutes and then the half-an-hour and then the 15 minutes that you're on break, the calls come in continuously when you come in there because the computer is doing the dialling, and as soon as you are off one call, you have got another one coming in.*

> Ellen: *It's almost like the army. It's very regimented. You punch in with a time clock. You come in and you sit down, and the numbers are all computerized. As soon as you finish a call, the minute you hang up another call comes up. It is just this constant, all day, repetitious . . . constant sort of like beating on a drum, but day after day.*

The automation of call centres is stressful for workers, both because it creates greater pressures for productivity, but also, and importantly, because workers experience a profound lack of control over their workday activities.

> Sylvia: *And then I always had so much freedom in my [past] jobs. I could take my coffee when I wanted. I could take an hour-and-a-half lunch if I wanted and make it up somewhere else. This, you're totally tied to the phone. You're logged into a computer, you know, so you have no control over eight hours of your life.*

Technology and Worker Surveillance

Another implication of the widespread utilization of telematics in call centres is the extent to which it facilitates the close monitoring of employee performance and the enforcement of increased standards for productivity. Statistical outputs of individual worker's performance are done daily. Among these are measures of talk time, "in-line" time and conversion rates. Talk time is the average length of a call, which must neither be too short (not trying hard enough) or too long (inefficient). "In-line" is a measure of the proportion of time during a shift that an in-house agent is available to take calls or deal with customers. Conversion rates are the proportion of calls that result in a completed sale or reservation. Frequently, workers receive performance evaluations based on these statistics and others like them. These quantitative measures would often determine future work hours or future employment.

> Melissa: *My talk time was down to just over a minute. Well, no, well, no, that is a lie. 180 seconds was my lowest. That is too low. Because then you are, then they figure you are not offering to sell, you are not pushing the sale enough, you are not being as assertive as you should be. It is kind of stupid.*
>
> Helen: *Once they got the computers, they got really obsessed with statistics and started cattle prodding us all the time and all this stuff. They always wanted you to get so many completes per hour, so many completes per hour.*
>
> Cynthia: *They really pressured their employees to make a quota. . . . In the last two call centres I've been at—I'm actually working for a call centre right now—there's pressure to get the quotas. They say that they're not really interested in numbers. They say that they are more into quality. Well, that's a lie. They're usually more into numbers than anything.*

In contrast to their concerns about the arbitrariness of performance pressures embedded in these quantitative measures, the common practice of surveillance through random monitoring of telephone calls did not typically worry call centre workers. This was because most people we spoke with appreciated the qualitative performance feedback that they obtained from monitors and supervisors. Workers generally perceived this aspect of their work evaluation as helping to enhance their skills and professionalism. The primary concern of workers in this area, as noted above, is that statistical surveillance is increasingly replacing qualitative monitoring. It should be noted that this tendency is generally thought to work to the detriment of workers and customers, as pressures to process more calls supersede concerns about the quality of the service that each customer is receiving. This undermines the worker's own sense of professionalism that is derived from being able to provide a high-quality service to the customer, which we will discuss further in the following chapter.

Through the workplace descriptions detailed in many interviews, one can visualize a virtual "cyber-guard" pacing the rows of teleworkers. One is reminded of French philosopher Michel Foucault's well-known description of Bentham's Panopticon in which prisoners are subjected

to the constant possibility of surveillance.[27] Shoshana Zuboff has used Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power illustrated by the Panopticon image to explain the ways in which technologies are deployed in the contemporary workplace.

> Techniques of control in the workplace became increasingly important as the body became the central problem for production. The early industrial employers needed to regulate, direct, constrain, anchor, and channel bodily energies for the purposes of sustained, often repetitive, productive activity (Zuboff, 1988, p. 319).

The high-tech version of the Panopticon that Zuboff outlined no longer needs an observer.

> Information systems can automatically and continuously record almost anything their designers want to capture, regardless of the specific intentions brought to the design process or the motives that guide data interpretation and utilization (Zuboff, 1988, p. 322).

The technologies induce compliance without the need for managers to intervene. Many call centres offer prime examples of this exercise of disciplinary power through automated surveillance, as well as illustrating the negative implications of this management style for individuals both within and beyond call centre employment.

Dressing "Invisible" Workers

Another example of the exercise of disciplinary power in the call centre environment is the enforcement of dress codes. Call centre workers are drawn from a distinct labour pool of women and youth, who tend to differ in appearance and dress from the stereotypically suited downtown office worker. Although it was not a subject we had planned to investigate, the issue of appearance cropped up in many of our conversations with call centre workers.

> Randy: *I mean, you walk down Broadway, and you come into our building and it's like the people sitting out front don't look like all the other people sitting outside all the other buildings.*

> Anthony: *If you go into your average phone room, I mean, it's an interesting cast of characters. Sometimes it is quite the motley crew.*

We were surprised by the professional dress codes enforced at many call centres, despite the fact that the workers conducting business over the telephone are effectively invisible to clients. The reasons for enforcement of professional dress codes are unclear, although they do seem to be linked to either or both the disciplinary control of workers or the construction of the work as "professional." Management would justify such codes by claiming that potential clients who visit the call centre would be more impressed by a professional-looking work force or that the office building itself had (explicit or implicit) professional dress code requirements for tenants.

The content of these professional dress codes generally required a tie and collar for men, and dress pants or skirts of conservative length for women. Visible tattoos were frowned upon, as were piercings, other than earrings for women. Hair was required to be within a "normal spectrum of hair colours," at a gender-appropriate length. Many young men, in particular, spoke of having to purchase office attire for their call centre jobs. Lower-paying outbound call centres would often monitor the appearances of workers with as much rigor as higher-paid, in-house call centres, although they showed much less concern with "professionalism" in other dimensions. Outbound centres that hired younger and less educated workers invested less in training or promoting their employees and expected higher rates of turnover appeared more likely to rely on dress codes solely as a disciplinary mechanism, a way to keep a work force perceived as potentially "unruly" under control.

> Jacqueline: *I looked a lot different, and I had body piercings and pink hair, and all that sort of stuff, but then they changed it that you have to have professional-casual, no visible piercings, not visible tattoos and hair colour that is in the normal hair colour spectrum.*

> Sylvia: *There is one fellow who had some sort of a tattoo. It wasn't a huge-like tattoo completely all over, and he had worn a short-sleeved shirt on casual day, and he always wears long-sleeved shirts, and he was talked to about it, and it wasn't a huge dragon or anything, it was just a tattoo, so that is what I mean that they are stricter [at this new firm].*

These professional dress codes also carry interesting gendered subtexts. More unisex "alternative" appearances are discouraged by such a dress code, where men and women may use cosmetics, dye hair brightly, have piercings or tattoos, and a non-traditional hair length for their gender category. Male dress codes were enforced more strictly than those for women.

> Randy: *Our dress code was really sexist . . . like, in reverse in that the men's dress code was so strict. There was very little room for anything where women could technically get away with coming to work in a pair of tights and a big T-shirt.*

> Sylvia: *Women can't wear open toes shoes—your skirt can't be more than two inches above your knee. . . . The only difference is that men don't have to wear a tie on Fridays.*

One impetus for the strict monitoring of gender through dress could be related to the "real" presence of gay, lesbian and bisexual workers at Winnipeg call centres. In Winnipeg, five of our research participants identified themselves as gay or lesbian. Most of the other workers interviewed would nod in agreement when asked if they had many gay, lesbian or bisexual colleagues. The word "alternative" was often used by workers in Winnipeg to describe themselves and colleagues—a term which does not explicitly refer to sexuality but does imply a rejection of hetero-normativity within the dominant culture, among other things.

"Alternative" youth working in Winnipeg, however, were required through their dress codes to perform gender "straight." In other words, whatever their personal identities happened to be, they were forced into the society standard of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980).

> Sylvia: *They would never hire anyone who was openly gay, but I know that there are a couple of them who are gay. . . . They won't hire a man with an earring.*

Ironically, given the enforced heterosexism of the dress codes, one reason why firms may hire non-straight workers is due to the fact that their sexuality marginalizes them in labour markets. Just as women are disproportionately represented in call centres because of pre-existing labour market disadvantages, so are other marginal groups. Gay, lesbian and bisexual youth may accept low-wage work at call centres because their options in other areas are more limited. Call centre jobs may be attractive to many people, particularly youth, who wish to preserve a certain amount of privacy during their "coming-out" period (Wood, 1993). These workers are also often spatially marginalized. The downtown location of most Winnipeg call centres is near existing "gay ghettos," which provide a convenient source of available labour (LeVay and Nonas, 1995).

> Christopher: *Because they have been accepted as straight men their whole lives, so they have that confidence to get all of the jobs. . . . You are going to look for a job that is a little more obscure . . . that you can go to and the people that you deal with don't see you. They don't really know anything about you until you are comfortable with yourself, I suppose.*

> Randy: *They have a lot of gay and/or lesbian or bisexual employees, maybe higher than in other industries, and it might have to do with the fact that it comes off as a service industry as well, and that is stereotypical, if nothing else, that people tend to be working in . . . talking about street youth or people that, well, in general, and this is not necessarily sexuality-related, but in terms of appearance-related, people that can't, appearance-wise, get jobs in many other places.*

Dress code enforcement, particularly in Winnipeg, turned out to be one of the sources of stress for many call centre employees. Worker turnover reportedly increased at several centres when firms attempted to control their appearance. Firms that wish to maintain a more stable work force with a lower rate of turnovers may need to consider the identity of their work force and the reasons behind the company policy on dress. Firms that employ high numbers of young workers may subvert their own productivity and lose out on valuable employees by enforcing policies that alienate this work force. Many workers would rather simply quit.

> Anthony: *My aspirations are not to be with the company for very much longer. . . . I had applied for a variety of positions and been turned down and told that I wasn't qualified. . . . And I got the impression that it was basically*

because I have long hair and did not conform to any kind of appearance standards that are somewhat backhandedly enforced in the sense that they hire their own.

Strategies for Managing Stress in Call Centres

We spoke with very few workers who did not report that they experienced significant work stress. However, the accounts of unstressed call centre workers are also crucial to our goal of recommending strategies to firms and governments for ensuring that these jobs allow people to be both healthy and productive over the long term. Amanda has a survey research job that allows her to set her own rate of calls, and compensates her according to the number of surveys she completes. In contrast to a majority of our informants, she told us that she actually preferred doing her work over the telephone, rather than in a face-to-face interaction.

> Amanda: *There's no stress and that is the part I like. I like it. No stress put on me. Especially if it is an evening shift, and it's a piece rate, if you want to make money, you dial fast, and if you don't, you can sit there. You're supposed to dial all the time, and they monitor you so they know if you're not dialling. . . . I like talking to people over the phones and I don't have to see them complaining. I'd rather that. I like that. Being a stranger, talking and getting people's impressions. It is kind of interesting.*

Workers considered breaks very useful to manage stress, even though the need for breaks often conflicted with management attitudes about productivity.

> Benoit: *A lot of people thought we should have a lot more breaks. They found that it really did help just to get away even for five minutes, to get off the phones and get your headsets off, and get out of your cubicle and walk around and get something to drink and then come back. You really do feel refreshed. You feel like you can handle more calls.*

> New Brunswick Group Interview: *He brought to management a Swedish study of video display terminal (VDT) users which suggested that every hour it is important to take a five-minute break just to walk around. They have them in Sweden and some companies have started having them in the United States as well, they call them VDT breaks. The manager that is on the occupational health and safety committee basically said that the companies response is that this is not cost effective. The response from the manager when he was told by the union health and safety representative that it is too difficult to sit for four-and-a-half hours was: "If your job depended on it, would you do it?" Of course, the answer was "yes."*

A few firms were more responsive to the stress-related concerns of employees. Bonnie works in the customer service department of a large insurance firm, where irate calls are frequent. She found that frequent breaks helped her to cope with the build-up of mental fatigue and

stress during her workday. Although she was allowed to take breaks when needed, such as immediately after a difficult call, they would be in lieu of scheduled coffee breaks. "Venting" with colleagues was another common way of coping with the stress of bad calls, yet it generally had to be done covertly.

> Bonnie: *There are times actually, where you are almost on the verge of tears. Supervisors are good. They encourage you to get up and go for a walk, take a break. We don't get scheduled coffee breaks . . . so when the phones aren't busy, you can take a break, or if you have an angry call. . . . There were times when you just can't take it anymore and you just have to get off the phone and go, and I know that some people have even left for the afternoon or the day. . . . [Venting] is very important . . . but as long as you're not doing it in front of a manager or something.*

One firm that we encountered had actually institutionalized a stress-reduction strategy by creating a "chill-out room" which employees were encouraged to use when they found the build-up of stress made it difficult to continue to do the work. In addition, this firm seemed to have encouraged, or at least not to have actively discouraged, the mutual support of workers. This is in sharp contrast to the highly stressed and competitive environments of some outbound centres, where employees were pitted against one another in the race for performance-related bonuses.

> Tariq: *Some people would work quadruple overtime . . . they'd be working so much overtime, that they would burnout, so we would have these rooms over there—really nicely furnished, low light, air-conditioned sorts of rooms. We call them chill-out rooms, or whatever. People would just go in there and chill out for like 10 or 15 minutes, and lie or what ever. The more senior employees would counsel the more junior ones . . . then things would be all right, and they'd go back to work again. I've seen that happen a lot.*

Conclusion

Our review of the sources of stress in call centre work suggest that there are a number of strategies that firms and governments may use to ensure that call centre workers do not "burnout" within their first year or two of employment. Since lack of control is a significant source of stress for call centre workers, measures that give employees greater autonomy, either over the pace of their work or over the substance of the calls, are likely to reduce stress. When workers are allowed a measure of autonomy and responsibility to decide when a call requires a "follow-up" without being penalized for reduced time "in-line," or when they are given the authority to issue credit or refunds up to a certain amount to help solve the problems of angry customers, their stress levels are reduced. As well, when workers perceive that the quality of their work is being fairly reflected in performance assessments, they are also less stressed. Firms that rely on qualitative performance assessments are likely to be much less stressful workplaces than those that define productivity solely in terms of quantitative measures. A firm in which management explicitly recognizes the stresses that

employees face and the skills required to cope with those stresses is also likely to experience less turnover of employees. Finally, certain types of firms are predictably high-stress/high-turnover environments, and should not attract the same type of subsidy from governments as other, longer-term workplaces. Indeed, these types of workplaces may end up costing host governments, in terms of lost productivity and stress-related health care, more than they are worth.

5. SKILLS, WHAT SKILLS?

This chapter focuses on the skills involved in call centre work, how workers acquire these skills and finally, the ways in which both workers and managers perceive these skills. One important policy question that this report hopes to address concerns the futures of call centre workers. Many consider skills to be the most important factor in the ability of workers to move beyond low-wage work. In an overview of post-industrial policy strategies, Gosta Esping Anderson (1994) suggests that some low-wage jobs can be useful, "conditional upon (whether they provide) adequate skills" for workers to carry into future jobs (p. 15). We are concerned that call centre work fails to provide individuals with adequate opportunities to use or develop skills that other potential employers would recognize as valuable. In saying this, however, we do not mean to suggest that the work itself does not require particular skills. Rather, the demands that call centre work makes on interpersonal and communication skills are categorized as personal "talents" for which some people, usually women, have "natural" aptitudes (Jensen, 1989). This is one mechanism through which work that is done mainly by women—of which call centre work is a prime example, as we have indicated—is undervalued.

In this chapter, we identify and discuss three general types of skill involved in call centre work: sales, communication and professionalism. The development of skills in each of these areas is gendered, as the work impacts differently on women and men. We found that the communication skills of workers also necessarily included a multi-cultural component, most evident in Toronto. Finally, we observed that contrary to most representations of the industry, call centre employment rarely requires or develops computer skills.

Call centres generally rely as much as possible on the existing skills of workers. Brief training programs of one or two days, and occasionally several weeks, are offered at many, particularly in-house, call centres. Training in the call centre industry tends to be short and project-specific. The focus is mainly on a particular firm's policies and services. We are also aware that government and industry organizations are active in promoting training initiatives for call centres within their regions, both at the high school and community college level, although graduates of these programs were not among our study participants.

Sales

Teleworkers, both in-house and outbound, are expected to function as salespeople at least some of the time. By sales, we refer to more than simply making cold calls to potential customers, but also the attempt to obtain from a caller a confirmed reservation for a hotel, convince someone to complete a market survey or recommend to an existing customer an additional company service. Selling was a skill commonly identified as important, but difficult for many of our informants to describe. Individual workers appeared to use a variety of strategies to "hook" potential customers.

Fred: *I don't know. It just comes naturally to me. I've never ever had a problem with it ever, you know? . . . you've got to bedazzle them. You have got to sprinkle some pixie dust on them, you have got to talk them out of the money, okay. Then what happens is because you just basically mesmerize them with a bunch of verbal diarrhea.*

Anthony: . . . *have a certain charm about it so that whatever way that is—there is no one way to do it—but there are just some people who can, for whatever reason, win over people's confidence. . . . That is the main criteria for being a successful interviewer. Getting over the hump of the introduction is the biggest obstacle. To be able to present and say that you are calling from a market research company, and you're not selling anything, and the survey only takes five or 10 minutes. You'll find it very interesting. Your opinions are very important to us and all that sort of stuff, to get all that across in the space of 10 to 15 seconds and to win someone over, and to have someone take 15 to 20 minutes of their time to do a survey.*

Maia: *A big part of it is that you can make them feel guilty. They are doing it out of the goodness of their heart. They're taking 15 or 20 minutes of their day out of which—to a stranger and for no reason.*

In an in-house call centre situation, telephone service representatives were often expected to engage in "upselling" techniques during service calls. For example, "upselling" would involve providing unsolicited advice on mutual funds to a bank customer who had phoned to inquire about the balance of his or her account.

Tariq: *It was always good if we recommended stuff—not in terms of selling it to them, but it was good if we gave the customer product knowledge. "Did you know that we have this, this and this. Think about it, and call us any time."*

In some reservations environments, employees were evaluated on the proportion of their calls that resulted in a confirmed reservation, or their "conversion rate." In order to perform well according to company standards, workers were required to urge callers to reserve immediately and to provide their credit card number to confirm.

Cindy: *People will just say: "Oh no, I'll call back in five minutes." . . . So I could say: "Well I can't guarantee it is not going to, it is going to be here when you call back." Stuff like that. There is just little things that you can say to make them reserve.*

Melissa: *[on suggested sales for hotel reservations] Instead of saying you know: "Well did you want to . . . would you like to reserve that room?" You ask them instead: "Would you like to guarantee that room for tonight on your Visa card?"*

Gendered Dynamics at Work

Although in chapter two, we already discussed the gender breakdown in call centre work, the fact that call centre jobs are done primarily by women plays a role in how the work itself is socially constructed. That is, gendered stereotypes and assumptions are embedded within and play a role in structuring the interactions between workers and customers. Although they are not face-to-face interactions, women working in call centre jobs are not immune from sexual harassment. Ironically, the fact that the interaction is performed over the telephone may exacerbate the problem. Socially, women doing call centre work are differently situated from men because of the role played in the public consciousness by the telephone sex industry, which is largely oriented towards male callers. Certainly, many of our female interview participants mentioned that sexual comments and flirtations were common in their line of work.

> Maia: . . . *[M]y boss . . . , jokingly, told me I should do phone sex.*
>
> Interviewer*: Really?*
>
> Maia*: Yeah. I mean, he was joking. It's something that you're aware of. I know that I've a 10 times better chance of making a sale or getting a donation from a guy. . . . I had some weird problem calls. . . . Sometimes when there was someone having problems on the phone, they would have them listen to someone who was doing well, and one of my coworkers . . . was listening to my calls, and he was saying that he was getting sexually aroused from listening to my voice. . . . It's the most disgusting thing that anyone could say. . . . Well, my boss was the one who told him to listen to me because he told me that I had a phone sex voice, and I should do phone sex. . . . If I let myself think there was some sort of harassment, I would have gone off the deep end.*
>
> Tariq: *The front liners are all women. A female's voice sounds nice on the phone. I don't know. I think there is almost like a sexual preference lying over it at some level. I think it is a fact that male consumers, when they call Sprint Canada, they like talking to women. If that weren't true, most of my colleagues wouldn't be hit on over the phone by customers. People get hit on, women get hit on, almost on a daily basis. . . . They tell them: "Oh you have a nice voice. Da da da."*

In contrast to the ways in which women workers were demeaned by being sexualized, male call centre workers found that their gender most often functioned to their advantage. For example, men might be stereotypically described as more authoritative or aggressive than women and hence, more effective. Men were often perceived as better suited than women for some types of higher-paying call centre positions, such as the financial services job that Benoit described in chapter two and the sales positions described below.

> Rob: *It seems to me that the guys were getting the positions that—there is not a lot of room for advancement, but what advancement there was . . . sales were a kind of step up, and I remember there were four sales positions and two of them were guys. So that is kind of unfortunate because we were 10 percent of the staff.*
>
> Interviewer: *And was that a better paying job too?*
>
> Rob: *Yes, a bit. I don't think it was that much. . . . They were probably making $17 an hour.*
>
> Tariq: *Mind you, when you are selling a product, it's almost always men. A large part of the selling force, or outbound force are men because of the fact that they are aggressive. When a man talks to you on the phone, whoever answers the phone automatically assumes: "Oh it's a man talking to me. Obviously he knows more." For some reason, he knows what he is talking about. More authoritative.*

Both gender segregation and gendered stereotypes are significant features of call centre work. The fact that call centre work is still highly segregated according to gender facilitates the persistence of stereotyped assumptions about the respective abilities of men and women. In turn, these assumptions serve to justify the continued wage gap between the sexes.

Communication

Communication skills assist workers in being able to efficiently deal with customers. As we described in the preceding chapter, callers are required to deal with calls as quickly as possible, and are evaluated both on the number of calls they process in a day and their "talk time," or average length of call. For the work of a call to proceed smoothly, the caller must both listen and speak using "deductive reasoning skills."

> Tariq: *I learned how to listen to people and communicate with them, as in figure out what it is that they want; how it is that I can communicate ideas to people; how it is that I can get the gist of what it is that they're really trying to say to me. I learned listening skills and sort of deductive reasoning skills from these people.*

Call centre employees, particularly youth, told us that doing the work increased their confidence in their own communication abilities. One needs to have a clear speaking voice for these jobs, although it is not always necessary that workers have a "Canadian" accent. We spoke with several workers for whom English was a second language who told us that one reason they took the jobs was to improve their language skills. Confidence, articulation and memory are all aspects of effective communication which younger workers found they developed in these jobs.

> Lisa: *I've seen people come into these jobs who wouldn't say: "Boo." They had their hair in their face looking down at the floor and have been shy, and it's actually an ego booster. If you can take all of the criticism and the comments that are going to get thrown at you and hang-ups in your ear, it's going to make you a stronger person. . . . My memory, my articulation is better. I don't slur my words. My projection. When I first started I couldn't project and have the words come out as clearly as people wanted me to do without practice. Working on the phones, if you have someone who can't hear you, you have to project into the microphone.*

> Shingo: *One of the skills that I'm not as strong as I wanted to be is my communication skills so, just talking to friends and family, they recommended going into a call centre. They said if you can talk on the telephone to total strangers, you should have no problem.*

Multicultural/Multilingual Communication

Language skills are commonly mentioned as an asset in call centre work. In Winnipeg and New Brunswick, this usually meant that callers spoke French and English. In Toronto, a multilingual agent might speak Cantonese or Hindi. Surprisingly, fluent mastery of English was not necessarily a requirement for call centre work in Toronto, where we found that firms often hired relatively recent Canadians or landed immigrants to Canada, for whom English was a second language, to make and answer calls in English. Call centre work is attractive for new immigrants because it is among the easiest of jobs to acquire.

> Shingo: *In the call centre I went to, people who had English as their first language actually was only 10 percent of the callers. Everybody else was basically from different ethnic backgrounds. . . . You can't get the office jobs and secretarial jobs. This is the easiest job to get. That is why you have so many ethnic background people in there.*

In other firms, recent immigrants were sought out for programs that targeted specific ethnic communities.

> June: *They hire people that can speak Chinese and English, and they have two shifts, and it has a very high turnover rate because a lot of people want to leave the company when they find a better job or there are other reasons . . . a lot of pressure. . . . They want to promote the Company's long-distance . . . savings plan. In that company, working, there are a lot of Chinese immigrants who just came to Canada for just half a year or even less than that. So, some of them don't even speak English. What they do is they just call them, and just based on the spelling of their last name, they speak to them in Chinese, and they don't speak English at all. . . . It is kind of comforting to see that some new immigrants found a job within the first month that they came to Canada.*

What is unclear from our study is whether these jobs served the longer-term interests of the large number of immigrant workers who perform them. The development of ethnic niches like those we encountered in Toronto has been studied in the context of American labour markets. There is controversy, however, over whether these types of jobs facilitate further integration into domestic labour markets and lead to greater mobility for recent immigrants, or whether they merely reinforce barriers to mobility through labour force segmentation (Waldinger, 1996; Sassen, 1998).

Telephone sales or service representatives are often called upon to facilitate the interactions between Canadian or American firms, and people who have recently moved to Canada. One caller suggested that hiring recent immigrants such as himself was a wise and effective strategy on the part of firms for smoothing out what might be an otherwise difficult exchange.

> Tariq: *Young coloured people like myself, like those working in the other call centres, understand both worlds to a certain degree. . . . They form a bridge though they can relate to North American, Canadian culture, but they can also relate to the cultures of their respective countries so, in that regard, call centres have intelligently sought to use this sort of bridge to tap into a market that, say, a white person might have difficulty tapping into because they don't understand. . . . I guess if you look at it, it is an effective marketing sort of tool to use one's own people to talk to you. . . . Some of them couldn't figure out their bills, their invoices, because they'd just come from China and Vietnam or something, and they're not used to things like late payment fees and things like that. I could actually relate to them. Mind you, some of the people who were born and brought up here who were working for Sprint Canada would be very frustrated with them. They'd be like: "Why can't these people understand?" I could actually empathize with them [the callers] because I've only been in Canada for six years now.*

In contrast, many non-immigrant call centre agents reported difficulties in dealing with customers who spoke beginner English and had recently moved to Canada. Both language and culture presented major impediments to effective communication. In addition, linguistic and cultural barriers could lead to lengthier calls, which would negatively affect employee evaluations, leading workers to resent non-English or French speakers even more.

> Rob: . . . . *the language thing. It was really tough. Those were the frustrating calls. Those were the ones that I found myself going 45 minutes later . . . but each call was timed to check our efficiency . . . your rating goes down. Your 45-minute calls were usually an Asian lady or somebody that couldn't understand what you were saying and you had a hard time understanding what they were saying. But they were the person who spoke the best English in the house or the best French in the house, so, you do what you can. It was really frustrating.*

Although call centre agents from immigrant communities appear to have particular skills that should make them more attractive to some employers, it is not clear that they are in a position to benefit from them. Rather, they find themselves working at call centres, often in ethnically segregated enclaves, because few other employment options are available to them. Like the other marginalized groups of workers we have identified in call centres—women, young people, and those gay, lesbian and bisexual workers in Winnipeg—it is their social position that makes them available to firms looking for cheap labour.

Listening as Emotional Labour

Good listening skills are crucial to call centre work. Listening well facilitates a caller's ability to balance callers' expectations of empathy with firm demands for efficiency. Callers often find that they are expected to perform much more than good service in their in-house teleservice positions.

> Marie: *I find that you're turning out to be problem-solver, accountant, psychologist for a lot of these callers. They call in, and once they place their order and they have their issues resolved, then they start going on the areas of their personal lives that you don't necessarily care about at that particular moment of time. They'll tell you: "Oh, I just got out of the hospital. My daughter's dead. My husband's dead." Depending on the mood that you're in, you just don't care.*

> Tariq: *Sometimes, you'd have to be understanding. Sometimes, senior citizens would call in just to talk about their cats and dogs. These people are lonely, and they need people to talk to. At the same time, you have a job to do, so you learn how to tread the fine line between being professional and being sympathetic.*

The work of listening, providing empathy and otherwise managing the interpersonal demands of customers while delivering a service is a type of invisible labour common to many types of feminized service work, not just that performed over the phone (Hoschschild, 1983; Hall, 1993). Projecting a friendly and helpful demeanor, regardless of how others treat you, is a common expectation in food service jobs and flight attending, two other feminized occupations. In her influential study of flight attendants (1983), Arlie Hochschild has identified this component of the work as "emotional labour." Emotional labour is a useful term because it brings into focus one of the least visible ways in which women's social roles in the private sphere are both extrapolated into workplace expectations and personalized, so that they become part of job requirements, yet are not formally recognized as skills.

Professionalism

Many call centre workers do not consider their work to be professional. In the province of New Brunswick, however, where a higher proportion of in-house service jobs were found, a

greater number of workers did consider their jobs in this light. Since more of those types of call centre jobs provide opportunities for education and advancement within the firm, it is not surprising that workers there had a different attitude toward the work. The way in which both firms and the provincial government publicly represent the work may also have influenced worker perceptions in New Brunswick. In other provinces, however, call centre work was more consistently identified as "service" rather than "professional" work because of its low pay and the lack of skill requirements.

> Ellen: *Because you don't pay professionals $6.50 an hour. And not only that, they can train anybody to do that. . . . There's no qualifications for the job at all. . . . If you can talk on the phone, if you've got a nice, clear voice, chances are they'll hire you, so . . . no, I wouldn't call it professional.*

Although many did not consider the jobs "professional," call centre workers in all study sites commonly spoke of and valued an attitude of "professionalism" in the workplace. Professionalism could mean taking pride in a job well done, using proper diction and a more formal tone, avoiding slang or overly personal discussions, or not "losing your cool" while dealing with irate customers.

> Cynthia: *I use a different tone [on the telephone]. I'm more professional. . . . Well, I have to be as professional as I can because I'm representing the company [a large bank], and I don't want to leave them with a bad feeling with the bank. Even if we don't get them to sign up with [a new service], we don't want to lose them as bank . . . customers.*

One of our informants in Winnipeg provided an example of what was considered a "professional" approach in dealing with a parent when she could hear crying children in the background:

> Camilia: *. . . And I'm like: "Well, why don't you go ahead and resolve the whole thing, and I'll call you back later." So, I set up an appointment, and I could tell that instantly she was relieved that I wasn't going to take any more time, and then, of course, I got a high score [monitoring evaluation] because I was being professional. . . . But I could tell just from the mother's point of view that it was like: "Oh good. Somebody understands."*

Professionalism was considered a real skill for those entering the labour force, particularly young people. Basic matters, such as regular work attendance, punctuality and good service were skills that the worker could carry into future jobs. Yet we have also pointed out the troubling tendency of some firms that employ high numbers of young people to impose working conditions and job requirements that make it very difficult for people to maintain a commitment to the work. Firms that deploy "high-turnover" strategies are undermining the development of precisely those "professional" skills that young workers might be able to take into other jobs.

> Randy: *You know your work ethic, you go to work unless you are really desperately ill? The turnover and the absenteeism in call centres, I've never seen anything like it, and if that's the kind of work ethic we are saying—and they don't get fired, either—now, if that is the kind of work ethic we're teaching 18-year-olds, what are they going to be when they are 30-year-olds?*

Conflict Resolution Skills: Irate and Obscene Callers

One skill that workers acquired was conflict resolution. As we have already observed, irate and abusive customers are not uncommon in call centre work. Firms expect that agents will be able to deal with those calls smoothly and effectively, without further alienating the customer. Similarly, in outbound work, residents who are angry at being disturbed at home routinely abuse callers.

> Benoit: *Unfortunately, there is something new every week; something that you haven't handled before. You have no idea, and unfortunately, it does take time. . . . Somebody who is very difficult or somebody really nice but who has had a very serious problem. . . . Something got screwed up somewhere. It was amazing how many times that actually happened. . . . You are supposed to handle it diplomatically.*

> Lisa: *If someone is yelling and swearing at you on the phone . . . you have to be able to take that in stride and say: "I'm really sorry I bothered you. It won't happen again." . . . A lot of people yell at me. They will yell at me and tell me that I've caught them in the middle of sex.*

Call centre workers are limited in their ability to control abusive calls. Some firms do not allow, or actively discourage workers from hanging up on obscene or irate callers. Rather, staff members are required to politely subject themselves to the harassment that customers dealt out. It was clear that this expectation meant that women workers were required to endure irate calls that were sexual in content.

> Shauna: *You are not allowed to hang up on a customer, whether it be an obscene caller, because there are some obscene calls, and then there are obscene customers. You are not allowed to hang up either way. I think that is something that needs to change. I think that you should have some kind of control over getting rid of an obscene caller, or an obscene customer should be dealt with in a certain way.*

> June: *You might find it hard to accept sometimes when people yell at you or when people talk dirty, or things like that.*

The differential impact of irate callers on women workers went beyond the issue of calls that were explicitly sexual in content to male callers intimidating and bullying female workers. One woman reported that she found dealing with irate men the toughest part of her job in the

in-house call centre of an insurance company. The policy of her workplace permits her to hang up on abusive callers, but only after she has issued two calm warnings and a polite thank-you to the caller.

> Bonnie: *I'm intimidated by angry men. Especially, we have. . . law enforcement officers, and they really intimidate me, and they almost scare me sometimes, even though I know they're calling from another province. They can be verbally abusive and threatening and angry men, in general. Angry women don't tend to be that abusive. They're mad and they're angry, but if you listen to them . . . they can settle down. Men, they don't. . . .*

Although like Bonnie's firm, some call centres had a policy for dealing with "irates," and might include a segment on dealing with difficult callers in their training programs, workers were generally on their own in developing strategies to cope with these types of calls. People who did not discover or develop techniques for conflict resolution experienced much greater stress.

> Tariq: *Especially some of the newer female workers. They would get shouted at by a customer. They really had poor coping skills, so they would get really upset or really burnt out really quick.*

As we discussed earlier, dealing with sexual advances and harassment are a routine part of call centre work for women. Dealing "professionally" with these types of calls was also one of the "skills" these jobs demanded.

> Ann: *Over the phone, I had two callers who I know were kind of interested in knowing my marital status and my nationality. . . . "No, I'm not interested in going out on a date with you." I have one caller that has been calling more regularly, and I'm thinking that he is trying. I told him to call me back in September. . . . You're a voice, and you are going to be friendly and all those things, so you get those issues, as well.*

As also discussed, irate and obscene calls are a major source of stress for call centre employees, particularly women. Employers' expectations regarding how call centre workers must handle these types of callers puts additional burdens on female workers. Since this is an area in which the gendered impacts of job requirements are both serious and identifiable, firms should be required to develop policies that protect female workers from sexual harassment and intimidation.

The Relevance of Computer Skills

One notable contradiction in the discourse surrounding call centre work concerns the need for computer literacy. These jobs are commonly mentioned in the same breath as other "high-tech" policy initiatives, despite the fact that they make use of no-more-than-basic keyboarding skills. Although workers spend their entire workday in front of a computer terminal and keyboard, when they were asked about what skills they developed at work, they rarely mention those that

are computer-related. Clearly, using a computer to facilitate a task and having computer skills are distinct.

> Louise: *As far as the computer stuff, it's a CATI system. . . . I don't even think it is a real skill, but it is something that I could put down on my résumé.*

> Melissa: *And they give you training to operate their system. It is basically a Windows-operated environment. You go in, you double click on your icon and it goes into the [firm] environment. From there, it is a reservation system. It is very, pretty basic, actually.*

We spoke with several workers who were very capable computer users, yet were not able to apply these skills in their call centre jobs. Although skilled, students often find they are unable to locate work that either uses or might enhance their existing capabilities.

> Shingo: *Oh, I'm pretty good with computers. I've been using computers since like 10 years old. The place where I was working didn't have too much to do with computer things. We just had a screen, and you have to read the questions. That is about it. I learned how to use the telephone really well, though.*

> Simon: *My problem with telephone work is . . . it is too dominant. . . . It is everywhere. I'm studying Computer Science. . . . Until I have completed [my degree], there is not much available to me. . . . Most of the jobs available to students who don't have any specialized skills are telephone jobs. That is what bothers me.*

In contrast, some workers—usually those at large firms' in-house call centres—find that training programs are available to them. For example, although she doesn't use the skills in her daily work, Shauna has been able to increase her computer knowledge at the computer training centre of the large company where she works. Even generous in-house training programs are generally limited to firm-specific software.

> Shauna: *The whole system is computerized. I don't think that is the reason why I have become technically proficient. It is because the company does offer you the chance to go and take computer courses. . . . All the different companies within the organization utilize a certain system, they offer computer courses that are related to those specific areas . . . Word 6.0 and Access . . . Power Point and Excel. All the Office Suite courses. I wish they would do more, but they are sticking to whatever they use.*

Even where one would expect them, computer skills are not necessarily a part of call centre recruitment or training. Additionally, most workers had limited computer access at home because of the low wages paid in most call centre jobs. One woman who sells Internet packages for a multinational telecommunications company was required to teach herself

about the Internet so that she would be a more effective salesperson. Yet this was not a part of her on-the-job training, nor was she provided access to a computer at work.

> Sandra: *When you are representing an Internet company, you want a rough idea of what you are dealing with. . . . When I got hired, the man who hired me said: "Well you know, you are going to train in a week. You might want to go somewhere and get on the Internet because you basically need to know what you are selling." So I did, and I got the Dummies book and read it. . . . But we just don't have a computer at home.*

It is important not to assume that because computers are used extensively in this industry that the work is necessarily "high-tech." This mistake is easy to make, based on the way in which governments publicly represent call centre work. During the peak of New Brunswick's call centre strategy in the mid-1990s, Frank McKenna publicly described call centre work as creating "high-skill, high-wage, pollution-free jobs."[28] Economic development materials that the Manitoba Call Centre Team issued emphasize "high computer literacy" and the "lowest national ratio of students per computer" to highlight a technically proficient work force, amid photographs of computers and workers (Manitoba Call Centre Team, 1997/98). Our interviews reveal that the call centre industry does not make use of the computer skills of its work force.

> Rosa: *To think of it as anything but a factory is wrong. It is a factory. I think in that way you can be duped by the technology, and the moment you see a computer, you think this is an advanced office and this is on the cutting edge of technology, or whatever. . . . It is not that at all. It is a factory.*

Typing seems to be the most commonly required skill at the typical call centre, which may again reinforce both its identity as "feminized" work and older stereotypes of women workers as unskilled. The reference below to the typewriter as a tool that "even women could use" is revealing. The relationship of women and technology in the call centre environment reproduces older social patterns in which men are the designers, women merely the less-skilled users of technology (Jensen 1989, Cockburn and Ormrod, 1993).

> Rob: *[More women because] typically, maybe there were more typing skills among women, and also, I suppose, you aren't trained to do anything else. . . . It is a great job for somebody who types real fast and sits there. . . .*

> Ann: *I don't know if it has to do with the phone or what. . . . I always remember there was this little picture when they were trying to sell typewriters. They would always sell it as a tool that even women could use, and they were trying to compare it to the piano and how feminine it was.*

Conclusions

This chapter revealed that contrary to its popular portrayals, call centre work is not skill intensive, at least according to today's high-tech standards. Employees leaving call centres are not more fully prepared for other, more challenging types of employment because they are not ordinarily expected to utilize more than basic keyboarding skills, and the communication and interpersonal skills that they do acquire are undervalued. The fact that most call centre employees are women complicates this problem from a policy perspective.

Our study of the call centre industry highlights the fact that dealing with the complex issues of gender and skills requires a multi-faceted approach. Recognizing and taking steps to eradicate the sexually based harassment and intimidation of women workers should be a priority. The gender segmentation of job categories within firms needs to be reduced to minimize the impact of gendered stereotypes about skills. Secondly, women workers need greater access to training and educational opportunities, both inside and outside firms. While the issue of training is important, it does not address the social dynamics that structure women's work opportunities. Therefore, efforts must also be made to recognize and valorize the value-added that is provided by the "good service" performed by call centre employees. If firms come to recognize "good service" as a skill in the way that some employees do, firms are more likely to value and compensate those employees more highly. However, none of these initiatives are likely to fundamentally change the limited nature of call centre work in relation to technological proficiency. Although we may be able to address the inequalities between men and women within the industry, the majority of call centre workers are still likely to take away from their jobs only a limited number of skills that are likely to be valued by other employers. In light of this sobering fact, assessing the prospects for life after call centre work is the subject of our next chapter.

6. LIFE AFTER TELEWORK?

Jobs or Careers?

> Candace: *Well, it's creating jobs, but they're not careers. . . . There's a huge difference. There's very little satisfaction in working at a call centre. There's no personal pride in what you do.*

Our penultimate chapter concerns the risks and opportunities of call centre work, and the aspirations of call centre workers. What futures do people who are employed in these workplaces imagine for themselves? How do these futures fit with the opportunities that are open to them in the restructured economic landscape, with the skills that they have been able to obtain from their call centre jobs? This subject is much too important to ignore, although the benefit or risk of call centre work for the people who perform it is highly subjective and variable, and impossible to quantify. Yet understanding how people who do call centre work are thereby re-positioned in labour markets is at the centre of the policy relevance of this study. We wanted to understand not only the nature of the work itself and who performs it, but also how it fit into the lives and career trajectories of workers. Here, we utilize many of the observations made in previous chapters on the nature and conditions of the work in order to assess the implications of the longer-term aspirations of individual workers.

Particularly significant to this discussion is the stressful nature of most call centre work and the correspondingly high rates of turnover in many call centres. Particularly at the "bad-jobs" end of the spectrum, a central concern of workers was how to get out of the job and into something better. In almost all the interviews in Toronto and Winnipeg, workers did not view their call centre job as a career. At best, they viewed it as a strategy for upward mobility—sometimes to bridge a gap between other types of work, sometimes to make money to attend a post-secondary education, sometimes to make fast and somewhat reliable money to get by while seeking out a better opportunity. Many of the individuals we spoke with fervently hoped that they would not have to remain in telephone work indefinitely.

> Maia: *At some point, there has to be something better out there. I only think of it as a means to an end . . . a way to pay my rent, or to pay my tuition. It would be the most bitter twist of fate, but I hope it would have nothing to do with the end. I hope to God I never have to do this.*

> Louise: *Yeah, it's an okay job, but I don't want to be doing this for the rest of my life. I'm sure nobody really wants to, but if I do, please, let me get up higher, past interviewing, you know?*

> Cindy: *I think, when I'm that old, I don't want to be looking around for a job in a call centre. Because it seems, well I want to have a career by then, something that's secure.*

Workers in Toronto and Winnipeg, especially from outbound centres, often expressed embarrassment about the fact that they were reduced to doing call centre work. Some described it as demeaning or dehumanizing.

> Sylvia: *I never tell anybody that I'm a telemarketer. I am embarrassed about it. There is no respect for telemarketers anywhere, I think. You're considered almost like a prostitute.*

> Maia: *We thought that we were doing the most useless job on the planet. There's no good to be gotten from it. I was trying to think while I was working there have I gained anything from this new job? I guess I noticed the media a little bit more, but that wasn't worth working there.*

The combination of limited job security, limited opportunities for advancement and stressful, monotonous work presented significant impediments to a worker who might otherwise consider a career in call centre work.

> Interviewer: *So why do you think that people can't do them as career jobs?*

> June: *I don't know. Maybe there are many reasons. First of all, there are not that many chances for promotion, and a lot of them are just a project. It's not like they require permanent staff. They're just hiring people for a certain project, and when the project is over, they get you out. It does not require a certain technique, that's the thing. You can get trained in probably one day, I guess, and then you can be independent, and work alone and call people. . . . Another thing is that it's boring. People don't like it. Maybe that's another reason. Its boring, and you might find it hard to accept sometimes when people yell at you or talk dirty or things like that.*

The most common impediment to pursuing call work as a career is worker "burnout." Many call centre workers reach a point at which they are simply no longer able to continue doing the work, despite the fact that they still need the job. People find themselves increasingly relying on sick days or stress leave when they have the option, and quitting where they do not. Others are forced to quit by mental or physical health issues that are a consequence of workplace stress.

> Melissa: *I'm burnt out on phones. The thought of tethering myself to another desk, to be stuck there for eight hours, only being able to move within a ten foot radius, for eight hours doing the same thing every 90 seconds. . . . I don't think I could do it anymore. I just don't have the patience to handle it.*

In contrast to widespread public and private initiatives in many Canadian provinces to encourage the development of call centre employment, and to sponsor education and training programs to prepare youth for careers in call centre work, our informants felt this work was

anything but a desirable career option. Considerable public moneys have been spent on forgivable loans to call centres setting up shop in particular jurisdictions.[29]

Community college and high school training programs have sprung up to supply the growing industry with a ready work force. Yet many of those we asked considered such programs unnecessary, even laughable, given the nature of the jobs themselves.

> Anthony: *It seems that the thrust of this whole call centre thing is they want to try to make this . . . it's as though they want to create some kind of environment that when you get out of high school, you can get a job. Do you really want to be doing market research for the rest of your life? I don't think many people could hack it. . . . The main goal is to make it a career-oriented thing. How do you even go about doing that, really?*

These programs, and the high-pressure management tactics of some call centres, seem less benign when one considers them in light of the particular vulnerabilities of younger workers. High school students or recent graduates may not have enough information to assess the utility or credibility of programs that claim to guarantee "call centre careers" on graduation. In addition, the confidence and self-esteem of an individual on their first foray into the labour market can be shattered by failing to meet the high demands of some call centre workplaces.

> Jacqueline: "*That's why it makes all these people feel useless because these are jobs they thought they could do. It's an easy job that anybody could do, and just being a commodity for a month, you know, doesn't do a lot for people's self-esteem. They're taking all this battery from people they don't know on the telephones and managers and your productivity isn't good enough or whatever.*

> Rosa: *The way people were fired, people would walk out of the office in tears. Now, that should not happen. Nobody would take them into the office and explain to them quietly, or maybe give them another chance. It was: "Get your stuff, you're gone" and that was it. And for young people, especially when it was their first experience in the work world, to be working for two weeks and then be fired; it was incredibly inhumane.*

Careers in Call Centre Work

As we mentioned in the context of our discussion on professionalism, a minority of call centre workers did approach their work as a career choice. These workers generally had better-paying, full-time jobs with in-house service centres for larger corporations or government. It was in New Brunswick that we spoke to the most "career-oriented" call centre workers, although there were also a few workers in better call centre jobs in Toronto who had no intention of leaving. In New Brunswick, both the firms and the provincial government used the media to represent the call centre jobs to the public as skilled and professional. As a consequence, the public perception of call centre work appeared to be better than in other

sites. More of the call centres in New Brunswick performed in-bound service work, and many were in-house operations of larger corporations. As we have explained, these were the sites at which workers at least had a greater perception that there was opportunity for advancement within, although we were unable to substantiate objectively that perception through our survey data. For these reasons, many New Brunswickers had a very different attitude about call centre work. A few younger workers were enthusiastic about their jobs, and their futures in those jobs.

> Ellen: *The way that they look when they hire someone—I was explained this—they look at you and think: "Do we want this person for a full-time career? Like, do we want this person here with us for this long or whatever?" So yeah, well, there's room for advancement within.*
>
> Interviewer: *What kind of advancement?*
>
> Ellen: *Well, the girl who did my interview, she started on the phone three years ago, when the company opened [here]. And since then, she's had four or five promotions. Like, it's very, well, it's very motivating, I find. And even the man who did our training, he was the same way.*

In addition to the self-esteem and professionalism issues, the jobs that people felt they could pursue for a longer term were those in which there was better than average pay (above $12/hour) and a higher degree of job security. For example, unionized call centre employees performing reservations work in New Brunswick were generally committed to their jobs, despite the stresses, because of the benefits that they could accrue through seniority. New Brunswickers cited job security as an important issue, but they appeared to equate security with the size of the firm. The bigger the company, the more secure people considered their jobs to be—surprisingly, even when they were not working for the firm per se, but through a temporary employment agency. Although the "good jobs" in New Brunswick had all been recently relocated from other sites in Canada or the U.S., attracted in part by government subsidy, the footloose nature of this industry did not appear to present much of a concern for young tele-service workers in the province.

> Interviewer: *If you look 10 years down the road, where do you see yourself, and where do you see New Brunswick?*
>
> Georgia: *Well, I would like to still be at the same call centre where I am now. I think the call centres have been a positive thing for New Brunswick, I think it's super. . . . Life is so unpredictable, but I hope our call centre will stay. They have closed out other call centres . . . they have re-located here to Saint John, now they could just up and relocate to somewhere else, I suppose, but they've spent a lot of money on the office, on the supplies, we have the best of everything, workstations, computers, chairs . . . you wouldn't believe the chairs.*

We also spoke with a group of government social service workers in Toronto, who reported that they were satisfied with their careers in call centre positions. However, they had all held their jobs long before the work was primarily done over the telephone, they considered themselves skilled professionals, and a significant proportion of their work was still performed off the phones. In many ways, their jobs were quite distinct from most call centre jobs. They did not have to deal with stresses related to job security, and they seemed to be evaluated on the basis of qualitative assessments of their work rather than on quantitative productivity measures such as talk time or "in-line."

Aspirations, Hopes and Dreams

For the majority of workers, career aspirations are not met in call centres, at present. What plans do they have? We asked interview participants to share with us their longer-term goals and anticipated career paths. Hopes and aspirations are clearly a very personal matter. We included discussions about people's life plans in our interviews, however, because we felt it was one way to extend the temporal dimension of policy debates over the value of call centre work. More than just a job for the moment, call centre work plays a role in the evolving life histories of workers, helping to shape both what they hope for themselves and their ability to realize it. Although brief, this discussion is an attempt to engage policy readers in a consideration of how some individuals attempt to use call centre work to advance their longer-term goals, while others find themselves "trapped" in call centre work. The chapter will conclude by providing some analysis of how call centre jobs can either frustrate or facilitate the realization of people's various dreams.

Jacqueline and Sandra were two young women living together as a couple in Winnipeg. They had both worked in telemarketing and survey research, although Jacqueline was currently working in a bookstore and looking for a second job in telemarketing. Reflecting on her experiences as a young survey researcher, Jacqueline, who was 20 at the time of the interview, told us that she had "missed the boat" on going to university.

> Jacqueline: *I know it's a job that I got because I couldn't get another job or because it's a real slack job, and it didn't encourage me to go any further as a young person. Like, I didn't go to school, which I should have done, because I thought I could do this as a job. It was always seen as such; that this is something that I could keep doing, that I could keep making good money at.*

Jacqueline observed that her aspirations for herself had changed over the past few years in which she had been doing call centre work.

> Jacqueline: *I want a house. That's it. That's my big dream right now. My dream before was to get a career, and it's not going to work, so I want a house.*

Her partner, Sandra, was working for about $8/hour and no benefits for a staffing agency that placed people into "in-bound telemarketing" jobs with a multinational firm. Although she did not see herself "climbing the corporate ladder" at that company, she was sticking with the job so that she could save money to open her own aromatherapy store. Other call centre employees had small business aspirations, as well, and all faced similar financial hurdles.

> Sandra: *I'm working telemarketing to save enough money to go and open a business. I'm stuck in telemarketing. . . . I don't want to have a business loan, or if I do, I don't want it to be very big so I'm looking at $5,000 or $6,000 before I can even [begin].*

> Moura: *I'm actually working on something right now that should have me out of there by September. I'm into a business with a couple of people who are also looking to leave. I think it will pan out for me pretty good. I don't plan on being there too long.*

Most of the young people with whom we spoke, like Sandra and Jacqueline, had dreams that took them well beyond the daily grind of their call centre work. Several were musicians, playing in bands and composing music when they were not working. For these people, the part-time nature of the work and the non-standard hours fit well with their lives outside work. One of our informants was a drag performer in his spare time, while another aspired to be a race car driver.

> Cynthia: *I don't know if I'd want to stay in sales forever. My goal is to get back into the music industry. That's where my heart is at.*

> Interviewer: *Is call centre work enabling you to get back into the music industry?*

> Cynthia: *No, not really. Not right now. It's just kind of taking a break from it. No other position has opened up in the music industry.*

We also spoke with people who had more conventional ambitions. Many students were working part-time in call centres to pay for their education. Some wanted to go on to graduate work, and even university teaching. Another, a student in the fifth year of an international relations program at the University of Toronto, wanted to work for an international organization and to travel. University graduates in call centre work often merely aspired to find work in their own field, the one for which they had trained.

> Cindy: *Yeah, it's not bad. I wish I had something degree-related. That's what I tell everyone. But it's not gonna happen right now.*

Difficult labour market conditions have led to many highly qualified people finding themselves in call centre work. Among our informants were an experienced government executive secretary (*Sylvia)*, a CBC journalist *(Rosa)*, a documentary filmmaker (*Marco)* and

a bank manager *(Jane)*. For many of these people, their grandest ambitions are simply to be able to return to the careers that they once had.

> Interviewer: *I'm assuming that you have hopes to eventually establish a career here in Canada?*
>
> Marco: *I'm not positive any more . . . who knows what the future is?*

Although some people were very clear about how they expected their lives to work out, many of our informants were ambivalent about how their call centre work experience fit into their larger plans and goals. On the one hand, the work provides a way to pay bills and cover living expenses for the short term. It can give people the space they need to develop and realize their plans for a better future. For some students, the jobs seemed ideal, as they were easy to get, had flexible part-time shifts and could expand in the summer. They also weren't bad places to get some basic workplace and keyboarding skills. The work can keep people who have been laid off from other jobs from sliding further out of the labour market, onto employment insurance and eventually, social assistance. These are all positive aspects of the work.

On the other hand, call centre jobs can quickly become a dead-end alley, because of their combination of low pay and high demands. People can become discouraged and depressed by their experiences in call centre workplaces. We have highlighted the fact that some types of call centre work pose potential dangers for the well-being and self-esteem of women and youth, and that there is the likelihood that they will experience harassment and abuse at the hands of customers, or in some cases, management. Youth are attracted to the work because it offers rates of pay slightly better than other conventional sources of youth employment, such as fast food service. It can allow young people to move into their own apartment, or support a developing talent in art or music. And yet, the promise of call centre work is limited. After several years, these younger workers often find that they are burning out on call centre work, their band failed to make it big, their income is not sufficient to support their efforts to better their education, and they have few other employment options available to them.

Like the assessments of the workers we spoke with, this chapter cannot provide a conclusive assessment of the longer-term costs or benefits of call centre work for those who do it. Our ambition was more modest. We simply hoped that by including this brief discussion of the longer-term plans and life trajectories of a few of our study participants, we might encourage policy makers to think in a larger temporal plane. We argue that in order to evaluate the impact of the publicly subsidized growth of the call centre industry on Canadian workers, we need to look beyond the numbers of jobs being created. Once it is appreciated that call centre work is for the most part, only a short-term solution, further policy questions need to be considered. Some of these issues, and possible strategies for addressing them, are presented in our concluding chapter.

7. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our final chapter summarizes the key issues identified in each of the earlier sections of this report, and highlights potential areas in which changes are needed. We offer these recommendations, subject to an important caveat: that the call centre industry is highly diverse, as are the circumstances of its workers. We are not attempting to provide "one-size-fits-all" proposals. If anything, our investigation of recent developments in this field has shown that government policies that target call centres as prime sites for job creation have generally failed to recognize the enormous amount of variety within the industry. Call centres vary in terms of the nature of the firms, the call centre applications (inbound versus outbound), their dominant forms of employment (standard or non-standard) and the people they employ (e.g., women, youth, immigrants). Although industry studies are sometimes available to policy makers, they have generally been driven by the concerns of firms regarding site selection or optimal management strategies. Important information on the industry, such as the gender, racial and age composition of the labour force, the ratio of full-time to part-time staff, and even average wage rates, has been generally unavailable. Our study attempts to address this deficit, at the same time mounting an argument for the need to integrate a more multi-faceted and qualitative approach. The task is not an easy one. Some policy makers have refused to acknowledge that keeping track of statistics on the gender breakdown of call centre work forces might be significant. While significant political obstacles may well exist to the recognition of the concerns expressed herein, the information that has been gathered and presented in this Report has made it possible to critically re-examine economic development policies which target call centres.

We also suggest that this Report may be of assistance in reconsidering current labour market policies more generally in light of globalization and the recent intensification of competitive pressures on firms. Many of the restructuring impacts that we observed in call centres closely tracked trends in the consumer services sector. We should note, however, that both the responses to our surveys and our interview subjects tended to be concentrated in the lower end of the wage spectrum of call centre employment, particularly in Toronto. Our recommendations, therefore, are also concentrated on the issues and concerns raised by these low-wage workers, most of whom are women. We recognize that in the service sector generally, and in call centres, a smaller number of firms offer secure employment to skilled employees in areas such as computer technical support. However, previous research suggests that men generally perform high-paying service work, in contrast to the low-wage, feminized work that is the focus of our study.

Approaching our in-depth examination of the call centre industry as an exemplary case study, we have highlighted five distinct areas of concern towards which responses might be targeted. They are:

1. Recognize the feminization of labour as an equity issue.

2. Support "good" jobs and discourage "bad" jobs.

3. Minimize stress-related problems and worker burnout.

4. Enhance the skills of workers.

5. Integrate the perspectives of workers.

The overall approach is multi-faceted, recognizing both the scope and complexity of the processes that underpin the current state of the industry, as well as the difficulty of bringing about meaningful change. While we recognize that the call centre industry's rapid growth has created thousands of jobs, there are a number of changes that need to be made to ensure workers can truly benefit from this type of employment. We consider responses and actions that most of the stakeholders must take: workers, unions, activists, policy makers, firms, researchers and academics. Consumers and clients of call centres, particularly charities and users of market research, are also occasionally noted as stakeholders when making recommendations. Many of the initiatives we include have been suggested and discussed at length in prior chapters. However, by restating them here, we hope to draw attention to their relevance in the call centre context, where they may have been overlooked in the past. We also note that where legal recommendations are advanced, they are framed at a very general level. Clearly, more legal research would be needed to investigate existing provincial regulatory environments and to propose and draft suitable legislation for each jurisdiction.

1. Recognize the Feminization of Labour as an Equity Issue

Workers/Unions/Activists:

- Work for the passage or amendment of proactive pay equity legislation to include the private sector in all provincial jurisdictions.
- When possible, investigate and bring forward pay equity complaints concerning segregated work in call centres.

Policy Makers/Legislators:

- Monitor the gender and racial segmentation of workers in the industry.
- Encourage compliance with existing pay equity legislation, where applicable.

Call Centre Industry:

- Work proactively to avoid discriminatory pay practices.

Researchers:

- Conduct more extensive studies of the gender and race wage gap in call centre employment.

We have noted that a significant proportion of call centre workers are women, and that many are also young (i.e., 29 and under). Significant groups represented locally in call centre labour forces also included gay, lesbian and bisexual youth in Winnipeg and, in Toronto, recent immigrants. The disproportionate representation of these types of socially marginalized workers in a type of employment usually corresponds with the devaluation of the work. In our case study, not only do more women perform low-paying call centre work, but call centre work itself is feminized—that is, it is structured as women's work. Low pay and non-standard (part-time, temporary, or casual) terms of employment characterize feminized employment. We also noticed, anecdotally, that where it was mostly men who did call centre work, the pay tended to be significantly higher. While more research needs to be done to confirm the existence of a gender wage gap in this industry, our work provides evidence to suggest that the need for pay equity is a potential issue in call centres.

A pay equity complaint might be pursued, for example, where (male-dominated) drivers for a courier or pizza delivery company are paid more than (female-dominated) dispatch workers, that is, a case where men are getting more pay for providing a less, or equally, skilled service. It is usually difficult to pursue this avenue unless a group of predominately male employees doing comparable work can be found in the same firm. For this reason, pay equity policies on their own are unlikely to get far in addressing the more systematic issues of the "flexibilization" and feminization of the labour force. Arguments made earlier in this report about the gendered construction of "skill" and the ways in which women's work is devalued must be more widely accepted in order to establish that call centre work is equivalent to other categories of employment within a firm. In addition, as we discuss below, a solid floor of benefits and protections must be constructed to reduce the differential between workers in standard and non-standard contracts of employment.

Our findings on call centre use of non-standard employment contracts is in line with the reported 20 percent increase in part-time employment in the last census. What the Economic Council of Canada said about non-standard work in 1990 is even more true today, and of particular relevance to the circumstances of many call centre workers.

> We recognize the benefits that non-standard work forms offer employers adjusting to changing market conditions. We also know that some people deliberately seek such jobs for personal reasons. However, our analysis has shown that non-standard workers generally earn less than others in full-time and permanent jobs in the same occupations and the same industries, and that, in the majority of cases, they have fewer fringe benefits. The earnings trends described earlier suggest that the increase in non-standard jobs may be increasing the economic insecurity of growing numbers of workers (ECC, 1990, p. 13).

Jensen (1996) argues that we need to be particularly concerned about the growing proportion of women in non-standard employment because of the limits that are

thereby imposed on the ability of women to achieve economic equality with men. Non-standard employees operate as a distinct labour market, with lower hourly wages, lower incomes, fewer benefits and exclusion from career paths. Jensen also points out that it is important to resist any analysis which reduces the confluence of women workers and part-time jobs in call centre employment and elsewhere to a mere question of individual choice.

> A form of restructuring that emphasizes market-driven strategies and solutions will continue to interpret part-time employment as a problem of "human capital" or of women's "choice" for managing work and family. Yet it is neo-liberal politics themselves that are contributing to the increase in part-time jobs (Jensen, 1996, p. 103).

Finally, "flexible" call centre jobs are generally a poor fit for men and women with child-care responsibilities. In call centre work, the lack of connection between the female-dominated work force and the prevalence of part-time work is even clearer. Part-time call centre employees are often required to work shifts of unpredictable length, with little notice of when they start or finish. This type of work, although it is part-time, would severely restrict a worker's ability to plan for child care. As so many call centre workers are young women or older women with grown children, we can assume that for those workers who do maintain a family, continuing call centre work may not be an option.

2. Support "Good" Jobs and Discourage "Bad" Jobs

Workers/Unions/Activists:

- Educate workers about minimum employment standards; monitor firms' compliance.

Policy Makers/Legislators:

- Enforce existing employment standards, particularly in low-paying outbound call centres.
- Extend worker protections, such as health and safety and the mandatory payment of social security benefits, to part-time and temporary workers.
- For temporary workers, require service contracts to delineate the employment-related responsibilities of each party, and to allocate secondary responsibility where the primary payor defaults.
- Prohibit "buy-outs," where a temp agency requires a firm to pay a fee for permanently hiring a temporary worker whom the agency had placed.

Call Centre Industry:

- Adhere to existing labour standards.

Researchers/Academics:

- Continue independent policy research of the expanding call centre industry.

- Widely distribute existing research findings to assist those working in the call centre industry with decisions. The industry itself, or provincial and municipal governments, conducts most existing call centre research. Due to competition in this sector, much research is not open to the public, including call centre employees, or employee groups (e.g., unions).

Charity Groups and Clients of Market Research Call Centres:

- Carefully examine the quality of call centre being used, and avoid firms that fail to comply with minimum employment standards. Note that to meet high performance quotas, workers may deviate from scripts or resort to pressure tactics that reflect badly on the contracting group.

We have noted the importance of distinguishing between inbound and outbound call centres in establishing a rough dividing line between the few "good" call centre jobs that we encountered and the many "bad" ones. The (usually large and established) firms that create in-house call centres for customer support usually offer reasonable wage and benefit packages, as well as access to training and promotion opportunities within the firm. These are the types of call centre jobs that provincial governments should be seeking and possibly subsidizing. Even higher on the call centre "food chain" are firms that offer specialized technical support or advice over the telephone, such as software firms, or pharmaceutical or health care providers. These are also desirable call centre jobs, although they draw their employees from a smaller pool of skilled labour. Few of our interview subjects would have benefited from the creation of these types of skilled call centre jobs.

Apples and Elephants: Comparing a Bad Call Centre Job with a Good Call Centre Job

Ann is a 24-year-old government teleservice worker in Toronto social services. She describes the elements that make her current teleservice job better than a telemarketing position she held in 1996. The components of her "good" job are extensive preliminary training; a reasonable hourly wage; no commission sales; ongoing relevant applied training; and a sense of control and progress in her work.

> Ann: *It is almost like apples and elephants, really, when I compare my first [telemarketing] job to this [inbound] job here. . . . I mean, it was about a two-week training period with this one I'm at now, rather than just being thrown into the situation. I'm actually paid by the hour. There is no commission sales. There is no sale going on, but I am better paid . . . $15.00 per hour, no benefits, while the other job was commission sales. There is quite a difference. In my three hours, I didn't make anything. I mean, the environment is good. They are good people to work for. I'm well paid. I was trained to do what I am doing by . . . once a month in our meetings, we also do—and this is new—a case study, I guess. What we look at is some of the issues that*

> *might have come up in one particular call. . . . It is just trying to keep looking at what we're doing, and keep examining and thinking about how we're serving people, and if this is the best way to do it. We keep asking those questions. It is all through the phones, so it is neat.*

Policy makers need to take the long view in assessing labour market policy. With respect to the many "bad" jobs that our study found in the call centre industry, the role of governments in subsidizing the creation of this type of employment needs to be seriously questioned. Do "bad" call centre jobs actually help people move on to better jobs, such as in the experience of the above interview subject? Or do they return to other low-wage service jobs, such as food service or retail? Do the subsidies provided for these low-end jobs represent a net gain for the working people they are intended to benefit? Our preliminary conclusion is "no." When our reserves of cheap and available workers are used up or burned out, these relatively footloose firms will simply move elsewhere. While there are limits to their mobility, these are diminishing. As switching technologies improve and telecom rates globally come down, cheaper pools of labour farther afield will become more available and attractive. For these reasons, governments should not subsidize call centre firms to create "bad" jobs. These would include jobs which pay at or near minimum wage, do not provide benefits, hire the majority of their employees on a part-time or casual basis or through temporary employment agencies, and rely on high turnover to maintain their productivity.

> Sylvia: *Well, there are jobs, you know. I mean, I don't want to get so political, but [Gary] Filmon is so proud that the unemployment rate has gone down, and yes, there are jobs, but 7,000 of those jobs are $8 an hour, when I was making $14 an hour [previously] . . . I mean, so don't brag that there are so many jobs. . . . A lot of them are part-time, and look at the other thing is the hours: the people I know at firm X work until 11 o'clock at night. They have families.*

Firms sometimes re-locate to avoid labour force difficulties or unionization threats at established sites. Before offering subsidies to relocating firms, research should be done on wages, working conditions, employee retention and other relevant aspects of a firm's existing operations to determine whether this is the case. Also, to ensure that it is more difficult for employers to engage in "race-to-the-bottom" employment practices through either relocation or the creation of precarious employment relations, the benefits associated with the standard employment relationship need to be extended to non-standard employees uniformly in all Canadian jurisdictions.

> The divisions which the existing institutions reflect and reinforce can be overcome only if unions, women's groups, and other popular organizations identify with and take up the struggles of those who are being consigned to the "bad" jobs in low wage service industries and small workplaces. This will mean becoming involved in campaigns to

> expose the violations of basic minimum standards by employers in non-unionized sectors and joining actively with community-based organizations to demand effective regulation (Cameron, 1995, p. 208).

Canada currently has a segmented system of labour market regulation, with workers in primary and secondary labour markets having very different access to legislative protections. Workers in the primary labour market, who are employed at full-time, permanent jobs, have full access to the employer-paid and government-paid benefits that are linked to jobs, as well as better access to the range of protections that collective bargaining legislation offers. In contrast, workers in the secondary labour market, which includes most of the call centre workers with whom we spoke, have limited access to these types of protections. They must rely on the typically weak provincial employment standards legislation, which is not well enforced. Bad employers are frequently able to get away with violations, such as failing to pay employees promptly or at all, failing to provide appropriate notice of termination and refusing to provide accurate records of employment.

> Lisa: *I was living with my grandfather, and it was hard to move around, and I was doing grade 11 when I was there, and I was failing. I wasn't sleeping right. I was coming in late. I wasn't going to my first morning classes. I wasn't coming in until the afternoon, and it all piled up on top of one another. They [the call centre management] told me: "You are laid off." Then, in turn, when they wrote me up my employment record, they said it was job abandonment. . . . Unemployment Insurance, they wouldn't give it to me because I'd abandoned my job. It was like I quit.*

The laxity of the minimum standards legislation and the lack of enforcement encourage firms seeking to minimize their obligations to employees to keep more employees in these insecure positions as a way of reducing costs. These strategies should be countered by efforts to "raise the floor" of protections provided in this legislation, reducing the gap in wages, benefits and statutory protections between core and peripheral workers. As we saw earlier in this report, part-time and temporary workers in the call centre industry earned less than permanent, full-time employees—in some cases, considerably less. Employment standards legislation could easily be amended, however, to require employers to pay non-standard workers the same rate as regular, full-time workers doing work of equal value (Fudge, 1991, p. 36). Another important amendment would be to provide part-time workers with pro-rated benefits or pay in lieu of benefits—both those provided by statute and those negotiated privately, such as participation in a dental plan. For employees who are temporary, or those who change employers frequently, as is common in the call centre industry, the availability of this subsidy would encourage the development of portable insurance plans, such that employees could continue to participate even between jobs.

One more ambitious strategy that has been suggested is the implementation of an occupational or sectoral bargaining model for small workplaces and the services sector, both of which currently present the most difficulties for organizing. The new provisions could be added to existing federal and provincial labour codes, both to facilitate multi-employer bargaining and to enable the extension of some or all terms of a collective agreement to other workers within a sector (Cameron, 1995, p. 200). While employers within the industry are likely to vigorously oppose this, it would be the most effective way to ensure that all call centre employees obtain a reasonable hourly wage and work-related benefits, whether they worked full-time, part-time or on a temporary basis.

Currently in Canada, the temporary employment industry is not highly regulated. As a result, the temporary help industry and the firms that use their services have been able to structure their relationship with employees so as to minimize their employment-related obligations. It is often not clear who is the "employer" in the triangular temporary employment relationship. Temporary employees (who are relatively common in the call centre industry) do not obtain many of the benefits associated with longer-term, more secure employment. This is the case even where the "temp" has been placed with the same firm for a lengthy period of time. They are generally paid less than the regular employees of a firm, have no access to the benefit packages (whether leave, health or education benefits) and cannot accumulate seniority with a firm. Additionally, temporary help agencies often attempt to restrict the labour market mobility of their "temps" by charging "buy-out" fees to firms that wish to hire a particular worker permanently. A number of legal changes have been suggested to improve the situation of temporary workers (Vosko, 1998; Fudge, 1991).

3. Minimize Stress-Related Problems and Worker Burnout

Workers/Unions/Activists:

- Quit call centre work when signs of intense stress and burnout are looming.
- Share information on stress management with colleagues.
- Support workers seeking to move out of the industry.

Policy Makers/Legislators/Educators:

- Integrate practical training for call centre workers on technology-related stress management.
- Evaluate the harassment policies of call centres regarding the termination of abusive and sexually obscene calls.
- Regulate telemarketing practices.

Call Centre Industry:

- Provide workers control over breaks and access to a quiet room.
- Acknowledge high-stress nature of work in this field, and take appropriate measures in the training of supervisors and workers.
- Encourage worker control over the termination of abusive and obscene calls.
- Educate customers and clients on appropriate telephone conduct.

Researchers/Academics:

- Investigate the longer-term impacts of call centre employment on health and career development.

Consumers:

- Be respectful when dealing with workers on the telephone. Do not be abusive.
- Exercise caution when making donations over the telephone.

Call centres appear to encounter perennial problems with worker stress and high burnout rates. Clearly, government subsidies are less well spent if individuals are only able to spend limited amounts of time working at these firms before burning out. Additionally, there are health-care costs associated with high-stress workplaces that also need to be taken into consideration. We have also suggested that high-stress and high-turnover workplaces might present a particular problem for youth, as they undermine the development of self-esteem and professionalism, which should be considered core labour market skills. In this way, some call centres can offer a very negative introduction to the labour market for young workers.

> Phyllis: *I'd love to talk to Frank McKenna myself. I'd just say: "You know, I'm one of these job creation . . . one of those people you gave a job to . . . but, it almost killed me." Blue Cross paid a lot of money for [high blood pressure] drugs for me. . . . You see, there is a lot of people that will take those jobs that are on social assistance or anything like that. They don't have any way to get their drugs.*

As we have already stated, governments should ensure that working conditions in all call centres comply with existing employment standards, and occupational health and safety legislation. Further research should be done to determine whether the productivity requirements and related job stress that have become standard in call centre environments present risks that require legislative reform. Call centre management must recognize and attempt to better understand the stress- and health-related issues that the work presents, so that they may assist workers to cope effectively. Giving employees opportunities to "vent" or "chill out" during their working day is one effective way to minimize the cumulative job stress that angry and irate callers cause. More attention also needs to be paid to the health implications of the work and the associated care, whether they are publicly or privately borne.

> Lana: *Advanced customer service [training is poor]. . . . We've been doing it for four years. We need other training. I find that I can't handle negativity any more, and the people that I thought could handle anything were like: "I'm at the end of my rope! I can't do this any more! They don't provide anything for us! Stress release!" . . . They [the supervisors] provide stress for us, is what they do, actually, just by coming and saying: "Look, your talk time was really up, was*

> *really long there." We have to account for every minute we are off the phone and that is a pain in the neck.*

Using quantitative monitoring to enforce unreasonably high performance standards clearly raises employee stress and turnover rates. On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that a focus on qualitative rather than quantitative assessments of productivity, at least for inbound centres, would both improve employee performance and job satisfaction.

> Randy: *I think there is going to be—and very soon, too—a saturation point, and I know it has happened in the States. In a few states, laws are being enacted for what can and can't be done, in terms of any kind of telemarketing, call centre work, and really restricting people even just asking for permission to continue with a call. I think that is going to happen all over the place, and I think that as people are more and more annoyed by the calls at home, I think at some point, there is going to be a crash point with the call centre industry. I think there will be laws enacted.*

Canadian jurisdictions should consider new legislation directed at the telemarketing industry. In the United States, the huge size of the telemarketing industry (30,000 businesses calling 18 million Americans every day) has spawned a wave of regulations directed at the industry. The *Federal Telephone Consumer Protection Act* of 1991 is the most visible of these new regulatory efforts, although numerous different initiatives have been advanced at the state level (Cain, 1993; Hamilton, 1996). As the telemarketing industry continues to grow rapidly in Canada, as reported in chapter one, it has become necessary to consider ways in which it may be regulated to minimize its negative impact on consumer's privacy. Although currently there are provisions aimed at preventing telemarketing fraud in the federal *Competition Act* [s. 52.1(3) *Deceptive Telemarketing*], that provision only regulates the content of the messages, not the way in which they are delivered. Yet regulations that reduce consumers' feelings of harassment could also reduce employee stress resulting from emotionally draining calls. One of the most significant and widespread initiatives in the United States is the effort to establish "do-not-call" mechanisms where consumers demands not to receive solicitation calls are identified and honoured. Other state initiatives have limited the time of day during which calls may be made. Finally, some states have implemented "get-to-the-point" regulations that require the caller to provide the name of the caller, the business and the services, and price, all within a set amount of time, hence limiting the intrusion on the consumer's time.

4. Enhance the Skills of Workers

Workers/Unions/Activists:

- Emphasize value-added of "quality" service.
- Refer to teleservice and telemarketing as "skilled" work, and resist descriptions of this labour as "unskilled."

Policy Makers/Legislators:

- Direct training funds towards workers, not employers.

Call Centre Industry:

- Offer computer training on company equipment to workers.
- Encourage employees to advance within the firm.
- Provide support for employees who seek to advance their education and training.

Academics/Researchers:

- Research targeted community college training programs to determine whether they actually develop workers' marketable skills or function more as placement agencies.
- Research economic significance of "quality" in telephone service provision.

While they are jobs that can help people to develop a high level of interpersonal and communicative competence, employment at most call centres does not offer much in terms of transferable labour market skills to its employees. Although many of the current government subsidies to firms are offered in the form of forgivable loans for "training," we found that the training that most call centres offered was very limited (sometimes only one or two days), and that it was highly firm- and/or product-specific. Existing programs merely subsidize costs that firms should and can bear. We recommend that government funds for training and skills development be directly targeted to workers themselves, to provide them with transferable skills. In this way, quality firms will continue to benefit from access to a skilled work force, while firms seeking to pay the lowest possible wages will not be able to siphon off resources intended for the benefit of their work force.

> Anthony: *My impression is basically that they [a Winnipeg call centre] got a whole lot of money from the Filmon government under false pretenses. . . . They received lots of funding for locating that centre here instead of somewhere else, and I think there was something that wasn't on par because it just doesn't seem right or a sensible use of taxpayers' money to have 50 positions that are being rotated through 1,000 people.*

Further investigation needs to be conducted on the subject of community college training programs. Based on the views of our study participants, it is possible that these programs only function as a subsidy to firms, by minimizing the costs associated with recruiting and training workers. We seriously question whether targeted training programs like these are preferable to programs which would offer more general labour market skills, or at least target industries likely to offer wages, benefits and working conditions superior to call centre employment.

> Jacqueline: *I think [policy makers] should put more emphasis on training and job placement right after training because we have a friend who just went to South Tech and he went with some kind of government incentive, and they did a job placement for him. He's working for a company and has a real job. . . . But those are so hard to get. He had to wait almost three years for that . . . but now he'll be making $30,000 a year instead of this incentive at a call centre where you make $10,000 if you stick with it.*

Addressing the problem of the undervaluation of women's work in call centres must go beyond the improvement of access to training and skills development. Women's workplace skills must be recognized as such. Jane Jensen (1996) makes the point that skill recognition often follows the form of employment contract rather than the other way around. Where women are segregated into non-standard forms of employment, as in call centres, a strategy that focuses exclusively on improving the women themselves—say, by training—will be inadequate.

> No matter the training that women obtain and the skill upgrading that they undergo, they will not reap the full benefits until they have access to better employment contracts. . . . If women are being trained, in effect, for part-time and other non-standard employment, the effects of the training will not be realized as long as women's part-time employment itself is cited by employers as evidence of lack of skill (p. 97).

One strategy that can also be employed in call centre work is to reinforce the value-added that quality service provides to firms. Emphasizing the quality of service has the effect of revealing the skills that go into its provision. It needs to be made evident that the communication and interpersonal skills (including the emotional labour that call centre work demands) are skills rather than natural "attributes" of certain types of workers needs. Firms perceiving that providing "good service" is a valuable skill will be encouraged to choose the "high road" (of quality) over the "low road" (of quantity) in the measurement of organizational productivity. If these skills are perceived as such and assessed, they may eventually become more appropriately compensated.

5. Integrate the Perspectives of Workers

Workers/Unions/Activists:

- Seek representation through unionization.
- Lobby for inclusion in economic development planning processes.

Policy Makers/Legislators:

- Develop consultation processes for policy development which include workers from a range of call centres, including firms with high rates of employee turnover.

Call Centre Industry:

- Seek worker input in project and work organization.
- Consult with workers in developing effective evaluation methods.

Researchers/Academics:

- Pay workers as consultants for time and analysis in labour market research, and budget funds as such in grant applications. Funders and academic ethics review boards should consider their approach to allocation of funds to research participants.
- Conduct more research on the particular impact of call centre employment, as currently structured, on youth.

Economic development policy regarding the encouragement of call centre work is largely conducted without consultation with those most affected, the employees and potential employees. Similarly, in most firms, call centre management rarely consults with the employees on the phones about potential innovations in work organization or the impact of new policies. Although they are in an ideal position to provide crucial information that could improve both employee and customer satisfaction, reduce turnover and maximize productivity, the input of call centre workers is overlooked. Our study has gone some way towards addressing this gap, but much more can and should be done to ensure that workers are recognized as important stakeholders in this industry and that their perspectives are understood and integrated into the policy making process.

> Shauna: *I hope you do well with your research, and it meets your objectives and has an impact. It is important to do this work so that people walk away with a greater understanding of what is happening out there in the community and how this approach is very democratic, in terms of giving voice to people, in terms of developing an analysis of what is really happening out there from various points of view. I think that matters.*

One of our study participants reminded us that valuing workers' perspectives must include providing adequate compensation to people for their time, whether it is spent participating in a study such as ours, or as a member of a committee or task force developing proposals for the industry. It is also important to ensure that the processes for representation of workers are meaningful.

> Helen: *I've been thinking about what you guys are doing [qualitative policy research], and . . . I just don't know. I just don't trust middle-class people's help. I feel like they really don't listen; that they decide what they think people need or want or should have. . . . I worked in market research before, and I noticed when you're talking to people and you need to pay for their opinions, and you need to pay housewives, you pay them less than if you need to talk to doctors. It is*

> *just a reflection to me on what people's time is worth. . . . My reward in this, I guess, is to get my story told or help other people.*

Some workers who have encountered abuse at the hands of unscrupulous firms have attempted to form organizations to publicize their stories. These efforts should be supported and complaints investigated, so that bad employers are exposed and bad practices discontinued. Currently, industry associations and provincial governments are reluctant to give credibility to such complaints, through the fear that the industry will be tainted by association. Yet race-to-the-bottom tactics are costly and unsustainable for both individuals and governments. Our view is that the provinces, the industry and the workers will be better off over the longer term if stronger efforts are made to identify and discourage bad employment practices.

> Lily: *See, what we are trying to form—it is called "Voices for Telemarketing." I don't know whether you have heard of it. I just like to hear stories of other people because I know there is a lot of good call centres out there, and I know there is a lot of bad, too. . . I think there is too many call centres coming into St. John. I don't think it is fair that people could walk into town, "fly-by-nights" they call them, like they would lay me off tonight and they would hire someone else tomorrow morning.*

The employees we interviewed described how many call centre jobs are considered dead-end work—a factor that appears to be overlooked in current job creation policies. There are few opportunities for advancement. Few call centre workers can imagine themselves doing the work over the longer term. While call centre work can be extremely useful as a stop-gap for those who need to support themselves while pursuing or developing other opportunities, it can also present an obstacle to further advancement. There is an urgent need to examine more carefully the experiences and perspectives of the large number of young call centre workers before further steps are taken to support call centres as a youth employment option, through encouraging recruiting in high schools, for example.

> Claudine: *The more conscious ones know they are being used because the system doesn't really care. It hasn't made a difference in young people's lives. The government is not good at developing programs for young people so that they can gain a sense of self, a sense of dignity and self-worth. They're putting the responsibility on the communities. This should be something the government is automatically pouring money into. Who are going to be the next leaders? It's the young people. If we don't give them enough tools to be the leaders, it's going to fall apart. We need to do more of that, but that's not happening. I don't think youth are taken very seriously, and they don't have a strong voice in positions of power to influence governments, corporations, right?*

A final caution needs to be issued about the limitations of relying too heavily on market signals, rather than the needs and concerns of workers and citizens, in the design of policy initiatives. This appears to have been the case with call centres, where the industry's rapid expansion has led governments to race each other to attract these types of operations for their job creation potential. Where the interests of governments and firms appear too closely allied, however, the negative consequences of policies can be too easily overlooked.

> Melissa: *I think because I have had two call centre jobs, one good, one bad, I come from an interesting perspective. I think that [Frank] McKenna [former New Brunswick Premier] did good in promoting the jobs. I think he should realize they are not all they are cracked up to be. And I don't think he does because all he ever talks to are management and the people they select. So all he is getting are the party lines. I think he should realize there are problems and not everybody in going to be suitable for call centre jobs that he might like to see. . . . You are not going to want to do it forever. . . . If I could tell Frank McKenna anything, I think I'd tell him to look at the companies more closely, and make sure they follow New Brunswick law and they treat their employees properly while they are here. Because it is not fair to be giving out half-a-million-dollar loans, in the promise that they'll create all these super jobs. And then within a year and a half have them lay off people and then not have to repay part of the loan.*

Perhaps the final word should be given to one of the many underpaid, hard-worked, yet still hopeful, participants in our study.

> Jill: *Mostly people are happy. But I guess I think companies owe—I think people are going more than halfway. The employees are good people, you know; they don't want the sun and the earth. There are just some things that would be fairer. . . . I think the potential is there to abuse the situation.*

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APPENDIX I: DESCRIPTIONS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Total participants:	53	Female:	35	Male:	18
Winnipeg:	14	Toronto:	20	New Brunswick:	19

Winnipeg

Bonnie, insurance teleservice worker at a large firm and a 31-year-old new mother recently returning from her maternity leave, married.

Candice, a 21-year-old telemarketer with a retail work history.

Jacqueline, 20-year-old former survey research interviewer, now working in a bookstore part-time, looking for another telework job for extra income.

Sandra, partner of Jacqueline, a customer service representative at a multinational long-distance company, planning to start own business.

Christopher, 22-year-old waiter, former telemarketer and survey interviewer at four firms in Winnipeg and Toronto, cousin of Jacqueline.

Anthony, a 25-year-old supervisor of market research call centre for eight years, musician.

Janet, partner of Anthony, a former survey researcher, retail manager of bookstore that now employs Jacqueline.

Donald, a customer service representative at a multinational company providing Internet accounts for the past 18 months, young university student.

Randy, dating Donald, recently quit an eight-month telemarketing job and is awaiting an Employment Insurance review, a 25-year-old university graduate in sociology, actor.

Ellen, a 44-year-old survey researcher for past three years in four different call centres, university student.

Camilia, a 29-year-old survey researcher for past three months, worked in food service for prior 12 years, taking courses in a healing therapy.

Sylvia, a 45-year-old telemarketer for past 18 months, former career as executive secretary working with high-level government managers, seeking secretarial position.

Paul, a 40-year-old former telemarketer, university graduate in artistic field, seeking computer industry position.

Allison, an 18-year-old survey researcher for past eight months, would like to become a call centre supervisor before pursuing a social work career.

Toronto

Amanda, a 31-year-old survey researcher, has done telework for approximately 18 months, mainly in the financial industry.

Louise, 24-year-old student and telephone interviewer for past year. Work flexibility assists with care responsibilities for a relative.

Claudine, 34-year-old youth advocacy worker who worked in a call centre for eight months to bridge gap between social service jobs.

Ben, 23-year-old student who has done outbound telework for past two years, also a rock/alternative musician.

June, 25-year-old student and outbound teleworker, speaks English, Cantonese and Mandarin. Relies on government loans to pay $14,000 university tuition for her professional program.

Marco, 37-year-old new immigrant from eastern Europe. Market researcher while seeking work in his established arts-related career.

Shingo, market researcher and student.

Shauna, 24-year-old student, customer service taking sales orders over the telephone, at position for three years, has participated in company-sponsored computer courses.

Simon, 24 years old, works intermittently at outbound call centre jobs, interested in work as a race-car mechanic.

Maia, 23-year-old student, has combined telemarketing and food service jobs for past three years.

Benoit, 25-year-old, former customer service representative at a mutual fund firm, currently seeking degree-related science work.

Margaret, a 25-year-old financial service worker, final year of international relations university studies, immigrant from Eastern Europe.

Provincial government teleworkers:
Brian, 53 year old, works for the provincial government providing service information to citizens on the telephone.

Jasmine, 52-year-old colleague of Brian.

Brenda, 43-year-old colleague of Brian.

Lisa, 18 year old, has worked at nine outbound call centres in the past two years, actress, plans to study theatre as a mature student.

Helen, 42-year-old relation of Lisa, former interviewer/telemarketer at several call centres, paid a large settlement at one job, labour activist.

Cynthia, 29-year-old trained musician and telebank worker. Former colleague of Helen, who is owed approximately $1,200 from past telemarketing job; case is pending.

Ann, 24 year old, multi-tasks in her government teleservice job: phonework, Web site setup, guidebook preparation. Had quit a 1996 telemarketing job; university graduate.

Tariq, 24-year-old journalist, former teleservice representative at a large long-distance company.

Rosa, former telemarketer for 20 months, turned union organizer.

New Brunswick

Thomas, outbound sales telemarketer with a grade eight education, previously a vacuum cleaner salesman.

Jane, entry-level telebanker, former administrative manager with a bank for 12 years.

Group of employees from a unionized call centre:
Tony, 32-year-old union representative at a unionized call centre, relocated from Toronto.

Lisa, 22 year old, assistant union representative.

Greg, health-and-safety union representative.

Jacques, 19-year-old roommate of Greg, relocated from Moncton for his "dream job."

Lily, disgruntled former outbound call centre worker who went to media.

Rob, 24-year-old bilingual law student, left inbound unionized call centre job due to burnout.

Jill, middle-aged, entry-level telebanker who has returned to the work force after some time away.

Fred, 29-year-old telemarketer, "natural-born salesman" who has worked with "sleazy fund raisers" for nine years.

Cindy, 23-year-old hotel reservation teleworker for two-and-a-half years; university degree in microbiology.

Georgia, middle-aged with a husband who has been laid off and an adult daughter. Worked at inbound call centre for three months. Now works at a less stressful job on recommendation of doctor.

Moura, works at outbound call centre, former secretary, real estate and insurance agent.

Lana, 22-year-old inbound and full-time call centre worker for past two years, ready to take stress leave.

Phyllis, 48-year-old outbound call centre worker, a top performer who collapsed at work and was hospitalized, she now runs a home-based business.

Leanne, fired from an outbound centre after five weeks of work, trying to publicize poor work conditions and unfair employment practices.

Susan, a young mother who works shifts at the same outbound centre as her husband.

Melissa, 22 year old, works at two inbound call centres, one much better than the other; university graduate.

Ellen, 22-year-old works at a large outbound centre for a temporary agency. Very pleased to receive a turkey for Christmas.

APPENDIX II: METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study was the production of a well-contextualized and thorough narrative of the gendered experiences of teleworkers, with the aim of developing policy prescriptions to improve the opportunities and working conditions of workers, particularly women, in this sector. The project included two separate initiatives for gathering information concerning the circumstances of teleworkers: (1) qualitative interviews with call centre employees; and (2) a mail survey of call centre managers. This was expected to provide a more nuanced and complete picture of call centre employment than either method would produce alone.

Interviews with Workers

We interviewed 53 "call centre workers" (the language used in posters) who had worked in the industry in the past year, including both current and former workers. The interviews were intended to be semi-structured conversations with workers on a confidential basis about their own educational backgrounds, entry into telework, experiences of the industry, work conditions and personal aspirations. We designed a template, or rough guideline, of questions, which we expected would last about one hour. Interviews ultimately varied in time from 30 to 90 minutes. Our hope was that interviews would develop in different directions, depending on the experiences of each participant. This is in accordance with the conviction that underlies the study that individuals are often the best analysts of their own situation.

Both of us together conducted most Toronto and Winnipeg interviews. By interviewing together, we found that we canvassed more issues and had a better likelihood of establishing a group rapport. Interviews were conducted most often in public coffee shops and restaurants, and occasionally, in private homes. New Brunswick interviews were independently done by Ruth Buchanan. We recorded most interviews on audio tape, and later, Janet Lennox in British Columbia swiftly typed transcripts. We learned to never turn the tape recorder off before we were finished talking. Often, the most interesting observations were made after the formal part of the interview had concluded, reinforcing the benefits of a less structured approach. Our approach to interviewing evolved with the study, so that subsequent interviews would incorporate issues that had emerged earlier.

Sample Generation

New Brunswick: Fredericton, St. John and Moncton

In a New Brunswick pilot study, Ruth Buchanan had already conducted interviews in call centres in Fredericton, St. John and Moncton. Approximately half of these interviews had been done on site at call centres, where the employer had provided the employees for the purpose of the interview, during work time. The second half of the sample was generated by a snowball technique, over the course of several years, when the researcher lived in and near these communities. Twenty workers participated in New Brunswick interviews.

Winnipeg

Posters were a highly effective way of gathering a sample of workers in Winnipeg, where we had one half dozen telephone calls within 48 hours of the posters going up. The downtown Winnipeg area, where most call centres are located, is relatively small, and we were able to distribute posters outside all of the major call centre buildings, as well as most transit stops in the area. We also generated some interview participants from contacts and friends that Sarah Koch-Schulte had in the local industry, where she had been employed for a time. Those we had interviewed who had spread the word among friends referred the remainder of participants to us. Two telephone interviews were conducted after our return to Vancouver. Fifteen workers participated in Winnipeg.

Toronto

Toronto proved a more challenging environment in which to find interview subjects, possibly because of our limited personal network in this city. An initial wave of posters throughout the downtown, focusing on subway stops, led to two interviews in the first several days. In response to this, and to comments that our first interview participant made concerning the distribution of academic research funds, it was decided to offer an honorarium of $20 to interview participants. The poster was revised in this way, and publicized in two additional ways. First, we had the information added to the University of Toronto student job search Web site and second, we faxed the poster to FAXLEFT, a service which distributes community information to approximately 4,000 non-profit organizations in Toronto. Ruth Buchanan had also completed one early Toronto interview as part of the New Brunswick pilot research. Twenty-one workers participated in Toronto.

Questionnaires

It was necessary for us to generate some basic quantitative information on the call centre industry in each of the sites. A survey was sent to managers of call centres in the three study sites. It was intended to give us an overview of the composition of the labour force, particularly gender, age, race and disability. The surveys also helped us to design subsequent interview research, and to provide basic information on wages, training and promotion within call centres. Existing data on the industry were unsuited for this purpose. No information was available, for example, on the gender breakdown of the call centre labour force, or on the identity categories.

Sample Generation

The surveys were sent out to 150 call centres. The mailing lists were created based on the information provided by economic development agencies that focus on the call centre industry. We are confident that we surveyed the call centres defined as such by their own public and private industry organizations.

The most complete samples and responses were in New Brunswick and Winnipeg. For the New Brunswick sample, we received assistance from Valerie Robinson, a provincial government employee responsible for the development and maintenance of the call centre industry within the provincial Department of Economic Development and Tourism. Because

there were approximately 40 call centres in the province, and the provincial government is highly involved in encouraging the industry, a complete list was obtained immediately. In Winnipeg, a complete list of call centres in the city was obtained from Joy Derhak and the Manitoba Call Centre Team, an organization created to encourage economic development in the sector, through a partnership of provincial government and local economic development groups. Surveys were sent to all centres on the list of 42 that we were provided.

Toronto presented more of a dilemma for sample generation. Estimates of the number of call centres in the province vary from 1,000 to 3,000 located in the metro Toronto area. At first, however, we were unable to identify a contact person in a provincial government or partnership agency responsible for encouraging the growth of the sector who might provide us with a list of addresses. Eventually, we did contact John Davidson of Urban Development Services, City Hall, Metro Toronto, who provided us with a list of 70 companies which reportedly had call centres located in the Toronto area with phone numbers. Sarah Koch-Schulte then telephoned each of the companies to obtain the name of the appropriate person to whom to send the survey and a mailing address. Generating the list in this way was considerably more time-consuming than in the other sites. As we anticipated a lower rate of response in Toronto, we sent out a larger number of surveys to all 70 firms we had on the list. However, unlike Winnipeg and New Brunswick, where we were literally surveying every call centre, the 70 surveys we sent out represented a small fraction of the call centre industry in Ontario. For this reason, it is more difficult to generalize on the basis of the Toronto surveys.

Survey Implementation

We mailed out the surveys in batches, with covering letters describing the project and encouraging the recipient to take the time to respond (Mangione, 1995). We enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelopes with each packet. We used timely follow-ups after the initial mail-outs. Three follow-up letters were sent in two- to three-week intervals. A fresh copy of the survey itself was included with the second follow-up letter. The timing of the four total mail-outs was as follows: Winnipeg mailings were sent out from May 1 to July 21, 1998; Toronto mailings were sent out from May 8 to July 22, 1998; and New Brunswick mailings were sent out from May 13 to July 31, 1998. We hired Dr. Peter Urmetzer, in Vancouver, as a statistical consultant to the project; he coded and analyzed the survey data distributions.

APPENDIX III: CALL CENTRE LABOUR FORCE COMPOSITION AND TRAINING SURVEY 1998

Researchers Ruth Buchanan and Sarah Koch-Schulte of the University of British Columbia conducted the survey to obtain information about the nature of the rapidly expanding call centre industry, the composition of its labour force, and the skills and training required by firms.

We will consider your completion of the attached survey as an indication of your consent to participate in this aspect of the research project. You have the right to participate or withdraw at any time.

Respondent Information

This section is for research identification and tracking only. The names of individuals and companies are considered confidential and will not be released as part of this study. For this reason, do not place your name or the name of your company on the body of the study.

Name of survey respondent _____

Telephone number _____

Position of survey respondent _____

Company _____

Questionnaire

A. Call Centre Operations

1. Nature of work carried out by this firm_____
_____
_____

2. Date this call centre commenced operations _____

3. Briefly describe the function(s) performed by this call centre _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

4. Has this centre recently been consolidated or moved from another location?

YES NO

If so, from where? _____

5. Was the local labour force a factor in the decision to consolidate/relocate?

YES NO

If so, identify the qualities that were significant: _____
_____
_____

B. Worker Information

This section asks questions about the composition of the call centre labour force, their backgrounds and training. We are interested in ascertaining the differences among call centre work forces across Canada and between types of firms. Please omit questions that do not apply to your situation.

1. How many call stations are at your call centre? _____

2. (a) How many total staff are employed at your call centre? _____

(b) How many are:

permanent full-time	_____	permanent part-time	_____
temporary full-time	_____	temporary part-time	_____

(c) What is the hourly salary range?

permanent full-time	_____	permanent part-time	_____
temporary full-time	_____	temporary part-time	_____

3. This question identifies characteristics of (a) permanent, (b) temporary, (c) full-time call centre staff, and (d) part-time call centre staff:

a) Of your current <u>permanent</u> call centre staff, please estimate the proportion, in approximate percentages, that can be described as:

29 and under	_____	age 30 plus	_____
female	_____	male	_____
visible minority	_____	physical disability	_____

b) Of your current temporary call centre staff, please estimate the proportion, in approximate percentages, that can be described as:

29 and under	_____	age 30 plus	_____
female	_____	male	_____
visible minority	_____	physical disability	_____

c) Of your current full-time call centre staff, please estimate the proportion, in approximate percentages, that can be described as:

29 and under	_____	age 30 plus	_____
female	_____	male	_____
visible minority	_____	physical disability	_____

d) Of your current part-time call centre staff, please estimate the proportion, in approximate percentages, that can be described as:

29 and under	_____	age 30 plus	_____
female	_____	male	_____
visible minority	_____	physical disability	_____

4. Briefly describe the organization of work within the call centre (e.g., how many supervisors per number of staff, are there teams for particular functions, how many different levels of employees exist that are differentiated in pay/benefits).

_____
_____
_____

5. What proportion (in approximate percentage) of entry-level call centre employees are promoted within the firm? _____

6. What role do the following five characteristics play in the promotion of entry-level call centre employees within the call centre? (please circle)

Technical skills	important	no difference	unimportant
Service skills	important	no difference	unimportant
Formal call centre education (certificate or diploma)	important	no difference	unimportant
Seniority	important	no difference	unimportant
Ongoing training and education upgrading	important	no difference	unimportant

7. What proportion of your work force would you describe as highly skilled? _____

Of your highly skilled work force, please estimate the proportion (in approximate percentages) that have the following characteristics:

29 and under	_____	age 30 plus	_____
female	_____	male	_____
visible minority	_____	physical disability	_____

8. Of your current supervisory/managerial staff, please estimate the proportion (in approximate percentages) that have the following characteristics:

29 and under	_____	age 30 plus	_____
female	_____	male	_____
visible minority	_____	physical disability	_____

C. Training Information

This section of the survey seeks to identify the skills required of call centre employees, and the training that is necessary for local labour forces to meet the needs of the industry.

1. What are the qualities of a good call centre representative?

_____
_____
_____

2. Of the entry-level call centre employees you have hired in the past year, please estimate the proportion (in approximate percentages) that could be described as:

post-secondary graduate_____
some post-secondary_____
no post-secondary_____

highly computer skilled_____
some skills_____
no skills_____

highly skilled in customer service_____
some skills_____
no skills_____

3. Does your call centre priorize service skills or technical skills? (please circle)

service skills technical skills

4. In what ways does your call centre recognize and/or promote certain skills?

_____
_____
_____

5. What types of training are most valuable for call centre staff?

service training technical training other: _____

6. Does your call centre offer initial training for staff?

YES NO

7. Does your call centre offer ongoing training for staff?

YES NO

8. Does your call centre offer ongoing technical training for staff?

YES NO

9. Does your call centre offer ongoing service training for staff?

YES NO

10. If available, how is training provided? (please circle)

in-house out-of-house (college, university)
Please describe:

_____

11. a) How many employees took advantage of this training in the past year?___

b) Of the employees who participated in training programs, please identify the proportion (in approximate percentages) that have the following characteristics:

29 and under	_____	age 30 plus	_____
female	_____	male	_____
visible minority	_____	physical disability	_____

12. What does your staff enjoy most about call centre work?

_____
_____
_____

13. What does your staff find most difficult about call centre work?

_____
_____
_____

14. Please add any comments that you feel would increase our understanding of the nature and composition of your labour force and your skills and training needs. If there are important questions that you think we have omitted, please advise us here.

_____
_____
_____
_____

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!!!

ENDNOTES

[1] As they are a relatively new phenomenon, Statistics Canada does not track call centres as such. However, there are many studies that have been conducted for industry or provincial government economic development branches. For example, see the report by Lou Caporusso of MEDTT, "Ontario's Call Centre Industry Profile," dated November 12, 1997, obtained by the authors from Call Ontario. See also Sharon Boase, "Busy Signals: Call Centres are Enjoying a Boom and We're Not Talking That Old Telemarketing," Hamilton *Spectator*, July 29, 1998, which suggests that the call centre business has been forecast to expand by 25 percent per annum well into the next century.

[2] U.S. Call Centres: Vertical Market Applications to 2002 (1997) Datamonitor. The same study states that there were 1.7 million agent workstations operating in the U.S. in 1997, projected to increase to 2 million by the year 2002.

[3] Supra note 2 at p. 4.

[4] Price Waterhouse Coopers study for the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development Trade and Tourism, Summer 1998.

[5] Supra, Call Ontario study.

[6] Supra, Price Waterhouse Coopers study.

[7] Coopers and Lybrand Consulting, "Canadian Call Centre Marketplace Profile" November 1994. Between June and August of 1994, Coopers and Lybrand Consulting surveyed 3,700 call centre operations across Canada. They received a response rate of 25 percent.

[8] Supra, Call Ontario study.

[9] The brochure, which was prepared by the New Brunswick Department of Economic Development and Tourism and is dated September 1995, contains these statistics on page 2, reflecting the importance of labour force availability to firms. Other cost comparisons were contained in the Report, such as a Boyd Company study which ranked New Brunswick against a number of U.S. cities, including Omaha, Nebraska, and Salt Lake City, Utah on a range of operating costs, including the cost of labour. New Brunswick ranked ahead of all the American cities for overall and labour cost.

[10] In 1994 and 1995, UPS relocated 1,030 jobs to New Brunswick, in both Moncton and Fredericton. The province provided an $11 million dollar forgivable loan to the company, giving rise to complaints of job poaching from other provinces, particularly British Columbia. See David Meagher, "Call Centre Officials Praise McKenna" *The Daily Gleaner,* May 3, 1996. Recent announcements of new call centres have included the American firm RMH Teleservices opening a 400-seat teleservice centre in Oromocto, for which the government is paying roughly $5,000 per job. Tim Porter, "Hello Oromocto: 400 Jobs in Works" *The Daily Gleaner*, January 29, 1999.

[11] Coopers and Lybrand Consulting, 1994 Report, p. 17. Ninety percent of firms conduct training in-house.

[12] For a more detailed account of a job fair in Moncton, New Brunswick, see Ruth Buchanan's essay, "1-800 New Brunswick: Economic Development Strategies, Firm Restructuring and the Local Production of 'Global' Services" in *Globalizing Institutions: Case Studies in Regulation and Innovation*, Jane Jensen and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, eds. (Ashgate, 2000).

[13] One provincial government employee suggested in response to an e-mail inquiry regarding the call centre labour force that asked about gender as well as several other issues, that gender was a "non-issue."

[14] For more detail on the methods and the way in which the study was conducted, please refer to the Methodological Appendix at the end of this report.

[15] All the names that are used are pseudonyms to maintain the privacy of the participants. See Appendix 1 for a list of study participants. Brief descriptions are provided to introduce readers to our informants. Ages, work histories, hobbies and educational backgrounds are frequently highlighted as they appear in interview transcripts. Relationships between participants are also indicated. Gender is specified through the selection of gender-specific pseudonyms. Attempts have been made to maintain the ethnic origins of names (i.e., English names, Chinese names), but as we did not ask participants to self-describe ethnicity, it is not included.

[16] Our results for the Toronto survey may be considerably less representative because of the proportionately smaller sample and a lower response rate. Although almost half of the 6,500 call centres in Canada are located in Ontario, and the majority of those in the greater Toronto area, we surveyed only 100 firms in the metro region. In contrast, we were able to mail surveys to all of the call centres included on government lists that we obtained for Winnipeg and New Brunswick. To the extent that our Toronto results correlate with results from other sites, however, we believe that they are still useful as evidence of more general tendencies.

[17] This category employed 3.7 million workers, or 26 percent of the total employed. Of those, approximately 1.6 million were men, while 2.1 million were women. One in every three women had a job in sales and service, as compared to one in every five men. Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, March 17, 1998, p. 5.

[18] The conclusion that call centres tend to utilize non-standard employment contracts is buttressed by a 1995 study of the New Brunswick call centre industry, which reported that at that time, firms in the province employed a mean of 46 full-time staff and 17 part-time staff. Insight Canada Research, "A Profile of Call Centres in New Brunswick" Report prepared for the Telemarketing Industry Association, August 1995 (on file with authors).

[19] Statistics Canada census data.

[20] As was reported in the 1995 Coopers and Lybrand study, "Canadian Call Centre Marketplace Profile." Unfortunately, that same study did not contain information on the proportion of the work force that was part-time.

[21] The greater number of students interviewed in Toronto may be accounted for by the fact that we conducted the interviews in the neighbourhood around the university, and that one of the venues through which we solicited volunteers was the Student Employment Centre. The size of Toronto, the number of call centres in the Metro area, along with the limited time the researchers had in the city to conduct interviews made it extremely difficult to obtain a more

representative sample. While we feel confident that we can comment on the labour market for students in call centres in Toronto, we recognize that there are many other aspects of the industry in that city about which we have much less information.

[22] Interview that Ruth Buchanan conducted with Frank McKenna, December 29, 1997.

[23] To be fair to Mr. McKenna, earlier in the interview, he had emphasized the importance of endeavouring to "move up the food chain" with respect to the type of call centre that was encouraged to come to the province. The New Brunswick strategy is examined more carefully in chapter three, "Good Jobs/Bad Jobs."

[24] Coopers and Lybrand Consulting, "Canadian Call Centre Marketplace Profile" p. 8. (on file with authors).

[25] One of our interview subjects found herself working at a fraudulent credit card protection operation.

> Lisa: *I was selling credit card fraud protection to credit card holders in the U.S. and they were all old women. . . . My first day I sort of had a knot in my stomach going: "This isn't right. Why are we only phoning women?"*

[26] It should be noted that the sampling methods differed for the New Brunswick interviews, which were conducted during a previous study. The snowball method was used while the principle researcher was resident in New Brunswick, over a lengthy period (two years) as opposed to the week to 10 days that were available in the present study for conducting interviews. See Methodological Appendix.

[27] Foucault adopts the metaphor of the Panopticon to describe the way in which society is pervaded by disciplinary power. "Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication." Foucault, 1977, p. 200.

[28] "Premier Challenged on Job Creation" *The Daily Gleaner, August 2, 1995.*

[29] By 1996, the New Brunswick government had spent approximately $28 million dollars on "forgivable loans" to call centres for relocation costs and training, including $11 million to United Parcel Service in 1994 and 1995. "$28 Million in Aid to Call Centers" *The Daily Gleaner,* May 1, 1996 (Fredericton).

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* Some of these papers are still in progress and not all titles are finalized.